



## Japan gas move adds fuel to fire

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**TOKYO, Japan -- Japan says it will allow companies to test drill in a disputed area of the East China Sea, a move likely to further anger Beijing at a time of strained ties.**

Trade and foreign ministry officials in Tokyo said on Wednesday they would award deep-sea gas exploration rights to private companies and would start reviewing applications later in the day.

Tokyo's announcement will likely be seen as a provocative one, as it comes as ties between the Asian heavyweights have plumbed new lows following massive anti-Japanese protests in China over the weekend on a range of issues.

One of those issues is China's exploration of natural gas near an area Japan claims as its exclusive economic zone.

The governments disagree on the boundary and both claim the gas deposits.

China has already begun exploring the fields, in a move Tokyo says extends into its zone. Earlier this month, a Japanese geological survey showed that the gas fields being explored by China likely extend into Japanese territorial waters, according to The Associated Press.

Tokyo on April 1 reiterated that China should halt its exploration and provide data on its projects in the area, giving Beijing a week to respond.

But Beijing says its surveys are within its zone and has refused to halt them or share results.

While Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi told reporters the energy and history feuds were "separate matters," and top government spokesman Hiroyuki Hosoda said the timing of the decision was coincidental, the move will likely worsen ties that have already hit rock-bottom.

Tens of thousands of Chinese took to the streets on Saturday and Sunday, angry at a new Japanese history book they say fails to admit the extent of Japan's World War II atrocities.

The protests -- the largest since 1999 when crowds rallied outside the U.S. Embassy in Beijing when three Chinese were killed in Belgrade -- also targeted Japan's bid to become a permanent U.N. Security Council member.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao told reporters in New Delhi on Tuesday that Japan must "face up to history squarely" and that the protests should give Tokyo reason to rethink its bid for a permanent council seat.

"Only a country that respects history, takes responsibility for past history and wins over the trust of the people in Asia and the world at large can take greater responsibility in the international community," Reuters news agency quoted him as saying.

The comments were the most direct to date of opposition to Japanese membership in the elite club of five powers with permanent Security Council status. China already is a member, along with the United States, Russia, Britain and France.

On Tuesday Japanese Trade Minister Shoichi Nakagawa said he was concerned about the impact of the Chinese sentiment on Japanese companies, one day after Junichiro Koizumi called the protests "regrettable" and urged the Chinese to protect the nation's citizens.

"Yes, I'm worried ... they're a country that's trying to become a market economy and we need them to take a proper response," Nakagawa told a news conference.

"It's a scary country."

Japan's leaders have so far apologized to China on no fewer than 17 occasions since the two nations restored diplomatic ties in 1972, according to The Economist Global Agenda.

Japan is now also widely regarded as a model nation -- a pacifist democracy that donates large sums of money to the United Nations and the World Bank.

But the scandal over textbooks has only exacerbated a deep-seated ill-will that Beijing has tolerated by allowing protests that are typically banned in China.

Of 1,000 Chinese in major cities surveyed in a telephone poll by the independent Social Survey Institute of China, nearly all said the textbook move was an insult, with most saying it was "open provocation," Reuters reported.

The protests saw tens of thousands of protesters call for a boycott of Japanese products, burning flags and shouting anti-Japanese slogans.

Tokyo has demanded an apology and compensation from Beijing for the damage caused by protesters, and demanded that Chinese authorities protect Japanese in China.

The tensions can be traced back to Japan's military campaigns in the last century. Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, and occupied various parts of China until 1945.

In particular, Chinese say Tokyo plays down 1937's "Nanjing massacre." When that city fell to the Japanese Imperial Army, tens of thousands of civilians and prisoners of war were killed.

There is also much resentment of Japan's WWII practice of forcing women from China and other parts of Asia to become sex slaves for its soldiers.

Several appeals by those women for compensation have been rejected by Tokyo's high court.

*CNN correspondent Tara Duffy contributed to this report.*