New Cooperation in East Asia

THIS YEAR MARKS A NEW ERA FOR SHARED SCIENTIFIC PURSUITS AMONG CHINA, JAPAN, and Korea. The three nations have embarked on a new cooperative venture to support and manage science and technology. Preliminary meetings of agency officials and nongovernmental associations over the past several years culminated in a ministerial meeting earlier this year that resulted in a joint statement.* The consensus is an epoch-making event for these countries, given that although each continues to reach out to assume a larger role in world affairs, the three have tended to bump up against one another over such matters as ownership and control of natural resources, immigration, and commerce.

Nations have long used collaboration in science to advance knowledge and enhance diplomatic relationships. As neighbors in East Asia, these three ancient nations share many aspects of history and culture. In recent decades, China, Japan, and Korea have enjoyed remarkable economic and social progress, although they were in profoundly different economic, political, and diplomatic circumstances when they began their rise to new prominence. Today, the three countries face a host of common challenges in health, ecological, and energy-related matters. The trilateral statement was forged to specify cooperative efforts across a broad range of disciplines, in approaches that anticipate both fundamental and problem-driven research. The work will affect the interface of modern and traditional medicine, energy technology (including the peaceful use of nuclear energy), and disaster prevention and mitigation (to limit environmental deterioration). Of particular interest is the planned Trilateral Bioinformatics Network, which will facilitate communication among scientists working in life sciences. Moreover, the tripartite statement is not limited to cooperation in R&D programs. The three countries have agreed to cooperate in following international standards for protecting intellectual property and to explore ways of enhancing scientific integrity.

This is all good news, particularly considering that each country is also currently undergoing dramatic change, expansion, and reform in its scientific and technological institutions. China and Korea are building new universities. Japan has extensively introduced competitive processes for research evaluation. Corporate investments are expanding in all three countries. Thus, although each nation is developing an independent strategy of its own to bolster science and technology, there is clear intent to build and support collaboration among their remarkably strong scientific and technological activities. That is a welcome development that deserves international recognition.

A key element of the trilateral statement is a series of planned meetings of leaders of the agencies that oversee science and technology policy, planning, and evaluation. The meetings are intended to assess progress made at each evaluation point, including the exchange of young scientists among the three countries. The joint statement envisions meetings at levels ranging from joint workshops for researchers to ministerial meetings in 2009 and 2011, and expects to hold meetings of agency officials in 2008 and 2010. And although it is far too early to expect accomplishments, there are already strong indications of progress. At the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in February, agency leaders and researchers from China, Japan, and Korea discussed their latest work on policy issues of common interest, such as the mobility of human resources and evaluation of research programs. The work of these agencies should be of interest in North America, Europe, and elsewhere, because each is engaged in imaginative analyses of national trends in scientific and technological performance and outcomes.

The challenge for China, Japan, and Korea will be to sustain the spirit of the joint statement through inevitable changes in national leadership and priorities, as well as developments in the world political situation. The hope is to transform that new collaborative spirit into meaningful advances in science and technology, leading to real solutions for important shared problems. With a new determination to cooperate, the East Asian region is strengthening its status as a region committed to making science a driver of global societal and economic development in the 21st century.

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