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EU-Japan ... A story of cooperation

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Research cooperation between the European Union and other world regions raises some eyebrows, in particular when the region in question is considered a direct competitor. Opinions range from no-talk policies ('friend or foe') to unrestricted cooperation ('we are one world'). Most, however, would agree that the appropriate position is somewhere between the two extremes. Take EU-Japan cooperation in ICT research, which is a classic case of mutually-beneficial ‘coopetition’.

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At the time of writing – it is April 2013 ... the 'cherry blossom' period – the EU and Japanese Authorities are in the process of implementing the results from the first coordinated EU-Japan call. There are, however, some elements from which we can already try to draw conclusions.

We can start by addressing basic questions: Who do we cooperate with (organisations involved), on what topics and in what ways (instruments used), and for how much (funding engaged)? Plus the underlying, essential question: Why? What is the rationale that sustains a joint initiative?

Europe already has a track record of successful cooperation with Japan when both regions agreed to support the same 3G standard. Japanese companies, such as DOCOMO, NEC and FUJITSU, have subsidiaries in Europe which facilitates cooperation. What’s more, many European research centres – VTT (Finland), iMINDS (Belgium), CEA-LETI (France) and Fraunhofer (Germany), to name just a few – have established ties with Japan.

As proponents of the EU-Japan cooperation, we understood that ICT was a field of opportunity and that the evolution towards global networks demanded new ways of interaction and creative models for working together. And key drivers in the ICT arena are the strong need for common standards and ensuring seamless communications (optical and wireless), common ways to store and access information and computing power (‘cloud computing’), sensing the world at large (‘internet of things’, IoT), and the highest security and energy efficiency standards.

With a common goal in mind, the challenge we faced was how to delimit specific areas of work in which Europe and Japan could make joint progress by sharing research efforts. A dialogue between the European Commission (EC), the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) and the National Institute of ICT (NICT) in Japan started in 2008 with the organisation of the first ICT EU-Japan Symposium.

Why EC, MIC and NICT? Because the three organisations manage significant programmes in Future Networks research.

The dialogue continued in subsequent years with the organisation of annual symposia in Japan and Europe. The scope of the discussion, initially confined to research and technological topics, was enlarged to address modes of interaction between European and Japanese organisations. One notable challenge was how to define a process for selecting and implementing research and development projects that was efficient and respected the principles of the 'parent'

programmes investing in the joint projects. Extensive dialogue resolved this matter and a joint EC-MIC-NICT proposal for a coordinated call was issued with a budget of €9 million.

The first ICT EU-Japan coordinated call [1], open from 2 October to 19 November 2012, addressed generic ICT topics: wireless communications, optical networks, cyber-security, cloud computing/IoT, federated test-beds and green networking. In Brussels, Japanese and European experts evaluated the submissions in January 2013. Six projects – one per topic – were selected and are now under negotiation. Projects are planned to be launched in June 2013.

The ambition on both sides is to continue the cooperation in the future and guarantee joint progress. Steps are being taken to fine tune the process in order to make it as agile (in terms of administrative overhead) and efficient (in terms of investment and impact) as possible.

The recent EU-Japan Workshop [2] on network technologies, hosted in Brussels on 18 April, addressed the “grand challenges” faced in the sector. These include high-density local networks able to cope with the simultaneous access needs of thousands of users (airports, train stations, major conferences and events), technologies supporting new business and social structures, experimental joint test-beds, and large-capacity high-speed broadband networks. Conclusions from the workshop serve as input to future programmes and research in network technologies, which pave the way for a better future in both regions.

More info

EU-Japan Workshop on R&D Cooperation in Networked Technologies & Systems – http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/ict/future-networks/eujapan2013_en.html [2]

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