Intellectual exchange between the United States and Japan is stagnating. This March, with the support of the United States-Japan Foundation, I visited Washington DC to consult with US experts about possible strategies to respond to this stagnation. While there, I realized that big changes are underway in how the major US think tanks operate in America’s capital.

One of these changes is that think tank activities on traditional security and economics are becoming more active and diverse, partly in response to the rise of emerging new powers on the international scene. Yet, all the while, American think tanks’ interactions with Japanese think tanks and government agencies such as the Japanese embassy are losing the dynamism they once had. Another one of these changes is that development aid for global health issues such as communicable diseases is starting to be recognized as a major issue.

The level of activity in Washington focusing on China and Korea stands in stark contrast to the stagnation of US-Japan intellectual exchange. Last year, 20 of the major Washington-based think tanks carrying out research and exchange activities related to Northeast Asia undertook activities focusing on China. In comparison, only nine carried out Japan-related activities, the same number as those organizing activities concentrating on Korea. The current state of affairs seems to be a product of the remarkable rise of China’s economy and, in the case of Korea, a major push on the part of the part of the Korean government and business sector.

In contrast, most of Japan’s policy research institutions are making major cutbacks in their international activities due to severe financial difficulties. As a result, a dark shadow has fallen over Japan studies in the United States as well.
In fact, the amount of funding that foundations such as the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership, the United States-Japan Foundation, and the Japan-US Friendship Commission can provide for US-Japan intellectual exchange activities has fallen steadily, declining from roughly $8 million in 1998 to about half that in 2007. Low interest rates are the main culprit for the drop in grantmaking by the Center for Global Partnership, which operates off of funds from its endowment and, with the economic downturn, joint US-Japan think tank initiatives that have an impact on the policy process are declining, even on the US side.

In response to this state of affairs, Washington think tank experts are saying, “In order to revitalize policy research and intellectual exchange, we must put an end to this trend of declining Japanese funding and restore funding to the levels of at least twenty years ago."

Japan is withdrawing from private-level exchanges at just the very time that America’s major think tanks are deepening their exchanges with China and Korea. It also comes as US think tanks are starting to expand their activities related to global health and international development aid. It is worth noting that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, one of the major funders for global health activities, dramatically increased its grantmaking from $3.3 billion in 2008 to $3.8 billion in 2009, even though its assets shrank 20 percent since last autumn due to the financial crisis.

American think tanks are now holding out hopes of being able to carry out joint research and dialogue on issues such as global health with a Japan that has such an advanced medical system and that has demonstrated its understanding of human security. However, considering how things have been moving on the Japan side, it is difficult to say that Japan’s response is likely to be positive.

The problem is funding. The government has pulled together a large stimulus package as an emergency response to the economic crisis, but would it not have helped if a tiny fraction of this could have been used to support international research and dialogue on the part of Japanese civil society?

For example, developing countries around the world with weak health systems will suffer an awful human toll if the swine influenza that is spreading around the world becomes a more deadly global pandemic—this could give rise to a crisis of worldwide proportions. Development activities growing out of US-Japan policy research and dialogue on global health could help ease these kinds of crises and, at the same time, provide an opportunity to help revitalize US-Japan relations. It would be nice if there could be financial support from the government and business for this kind of thing.

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