

A Quiet Form of Regionalism: Northeast Asia's Emerging Knowledge Space

Lizhou Wang and Yusuf Oldac

This article examines scientific collaboration among China, Japan, and South Korea over the past 25 years in the absence of formal institutional integration. Based on Web of Science data, it finds sustained growth in trilateral coauthorship, higher citation impact for joint publications, and increasing diversification beyond STEM fields. Despite geopolitical tensions, collaboration continues to deepen, demonstrating increased regional activity driven by academic networks rather than political structures.

Ask anyone with a passing interest in East Asian affairs to describe relations among China, Japan, and South Korea, and a familiar list will likely emerge: unresolved historical grievances, territorial disputes, lingering wartime memory, and intensifying technological rivalry. In recent years, export controls, semiconductor restrictions, flight cancellations, and growing concerns over “research security” have added a new layer of friction. Universities have not been immune. Since 2019, technology restrictions and heightened scrutiny of scientific collaboration have increasingly drawn academic institutions into geopolitical debates.

Against this backdrop, one might reasonably expect academic collaboration in Northeast Asia to be weakening. Diplomatic tensions often translate into mobility restrictions, suspended exchange agreements, and greater caution toward international partnerships. Yet scientific collaboration tells an interesting story.

The Trilateral Advantage

Web of Science data on 25 years of coauthored publications among China, Japan, and South Korea suggest that scholarly cooperation has continued to expand steadily, even during periods of heightened political strain. Trilateral publications increased more than 70-fold between 2000 and 2024, while the global increase in overall publications in the same time frame was only 8.3-fold. Publications jointly authored by researchers from all three countries consistently achieved higher citation impact than either domestic publications or bilateral collaborations.

Furthermore, collaboration is no longer confined to STEM disciplines, as shown by the volume of research collaboration among these countries. China has emerged as an increasingly important partner for Japan and South Korea in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. The most active trilateral collaborations are also concentrated in leading comprehensive universities, many with strong connections to hospitals, technology firms, and applied research centers. International

prestige and regional embeddedness therefore appear to reinforce each other, not compete with one another. All of these trends suggest that new spaces for regionally grounded knowledge exchange are taking shape.

Regionalism Without Institutions

These patterns raise a broader question: how is it that academic cooperation has continued to deepen in one of the world's most geopolitically contested regions? Unlike Europe, Northeast Asia has no equivalent of the European Higher Education Area. It has no Erasmus program, joint research funding, supranational governance structure or regional institutional architecture comparable to the EU. Nor does the region resemble the ASEAN's more formalized mechanisms for regional coordination. By conventional standards, Northeast Asia is rich in economic interdependence but underintegrated in institutionalization.

However, patterns of scientific collaboration suggest a more nuanced picture. Over the past two decades, researchers, universities, laboratories, hospitals, and industry-linked research centers have quietly constructed dense networks of cooperation across national borders. Academic exchange, coauthorship, and shared research agendas increasingly perform some of the functions commonly associated with regional integration. Northeast Asia may not constitute a political community, but it is evolving toward “quiet regionalism” in which Northeast Asia functions as a bottom-up knowledge region without corresponding top-down institutional frameworks.

This “quiet” form of regionalization is driven less by governments than by academic communities themselves. Shared disciplinary norms, long-term institutional partnerships, professional incentives tied to global publication, and accumulated interpersonal trust have proven more durable than diplomatic cycles. In this sense, scientific collaboration represents a form of low-politics regionalism: bottom-up, decentralized, and largely self-sustaining.

Changing National Roles in Regional Knowledge Production

Over the past 25 years, China's domestic research output has surged nearly 29-fold, accompanied by a steadily rising citation impact. Korea's output has also grown significantly, about 4.5-fold, with a slight rise in citation impact. Meanwhile, Japan's growth has been modest, around 9.25%, with its citation impact declining slightly during this period.

China's changing position within Northeast Asia's research ecosystem is an important part of this story. While the UK and the US remain important international research partners for China, Japan, and South Korea alike, China has emerged as the second-most important collaborator for both Japan and South Korea. This trend has become particularly pronounced since the early 2020s.

Perhaps surprisingly, such collaboration is no longer confined to STEM disciplines. China is becoming an increasingly significant partner in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. This suggests that regionally grounded knowledge exchange may be broadening beyond scientific and technological cooperation.

Chinese scholars in the arts, humanities, and social sciences often navigate dual pressures of achieving international research excellence while maintaining ideological conformity, which can constrain their ability to balance national priorities with global publication goals. Collaborating with regional partners in Japan and Korea who share overlapping academic interests and cultural contexts may help mitigate these constraints while strengthening mutual understanding and research productivity.

Relevance Beyond Northeast Asia

The implications extend beyond East Asia. Universities worldwide face a growing tension between geopolitical competition and the practical realities of scientific interdependence. Research-security concerns have become increasingly prominent in Europe, North America, and elsewhere. Yet the Northeast Asian experience suggests that geopolitical rivalry does not necessarily dismantle scientific collaboration. It may complicate cooperation, redirect it, and increase its transaction costs, but it does not inevitably halt it.

Scientific collaboration alone cannot resolve historical grievances or eliminate strategic competition. Nor are research networks immune to funding disruptions, tighter regulations, or growing concerns about dual-use technologies. Resilience should not be mistaken for invulnerability. Nevertheless, the broader lesson remains compelling. Building regional research communities may not require political consensus to emerge first. Sustained scholarly cooperation may itself constitute one pathway through which regions gradually accumulate trust, shared practices, and a sense of common purpose.

For policymakers and university leaders, the implication is cautiously optimistic. Attention may be better directed toward strengthening what already exists: supporting early-career researcher mobility, maintaining open channels of academic exchange, and enabling leading universities to act as stable anchors of regional collaboration. Institutions such as the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat and initiatives like the A3 Foresight Program already provide partial scaffolding for such cooperation. In doing so, they may be reinforcing one of Northeast Asia's most promising forms of cooperation.

Lizhou Wang is an assistant professor at the Waseda Institute for Advanced Study, Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan. Email: wang.lizhou@aoni.waseda.jp.

Yusuf Oldac is an assistant professor in the Department of Education Policy and Leadership at The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR. Email: yioldac@eduhk.hk

This article is based on Wang, Lizhou, and Yusuf Oldac, Y. (2026). "Stronger Together: 25 Years of Knowledge Production in Northeast Asia." Higher Education, 1–23 (2026). This work was supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, Kakenhi Project Number: 25K17029.