

Switzerland national day

Landlocked nation relies on innovative people

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I very much welcome the opportunity to address the readers of The Japan Times on the occasion of Swiss National Day. This special day commemorates the foundation of the Swiss Confederation in 1291.



Tradition has it that during the first days of August of that year representatives from the mountainous cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden met on a meadow on the shores of lake Lucerne to swear a solemn oath of allegiance. The Federal Charter that followed codified the alliance of mutual aid and support in order to protect their traditional rights, above all self-determination, against the then powerful Habsburg Empire. It took, however, some further 500 years before the Swiss Confederation, more or less as we know it today, came into existence in 1848.

In Japan, Switzerland is known for the beauty of its mountains, its landscapes and nature. Heidi, cows, chocolate

and watches are considered typically Swiss products. While all of this is true, it only covers a fraction of today's reality. As a small, landlocked country, with few natural resources, Switzerland relies on the ingenuity and resourcefulness of its people to create, maintain and further its level of well-being.

From an early start, Switzerland has focused its energy on education, research and technology. Particularly in the past decade, outlays for research and development by the government, universities and private institutions have increased to slightly over 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), putting Switzerland in the international top league in that respect. The lion's share of Swiss research and development is borne by private companies and partnerships between companies and universities. In the European context, Switzerland is the most innovative country and has shown the strongest innovation growth during the past year (European Innovation Scoreboard/EIS, 2009).

The government of Switzerland has set a strong emphasis on facilitating and broadening scientific cooperation be-

tween Swiss research institutions and individuals and their counterparts abroad. Japan, one of the leading nations in research and development, was identified as an ideal partner from the outset. A bilateral agreement on science and technology was concluded between the governments of Switzerland and Japan some three years ago. Its objective is to provide a framework for the promotion and enhancement of bilateral scientific cooperation. The launch, in 2008, of the Swiss-Japanese Cooperative Program on Medical Research is just one of the examples that highlights the positive development of the bilateral scientific relations since. The program is managed on the Swiss side by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH) and the Japan Science and Technology Agency (JST) on the Japanese side. Another benchmark of the quality of the bilateral scientific links is the number of joint publications that has increased substantially to reach about 600 annually. The many agreements between universities from Switzerland and Japan concluded in the past years are

further proof of the excellent cooperation between the higher education institutions in the two countries.

Scientific cooperation, however, is not the only link between institutions of higher learning in Switzerland and Japan: It is only a few months ago that a brand-new annex to the Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne (EPFL), which was designed by the Japanese architects Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, recent winners of the prestigious Pritzker Prize, was inaugurated.

The ties between Switzerland and Japan, long-standing and excellent as they are, naturally reach far beyond the scientific domain. The recent highlight of the economic and trade relations was the entry into force of the Free Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement in September, providing additional opportunities for economic agents in both countries.

Last, but by no means least, very recently the political ties have been strengthened by the establishment of a framework for intensified cooperation between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland and Japan.