



**Welcome  
to the Asian  
Century**

# Welcome to the Asian Century

## How Japan and Korea are winning the national image game



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**I**n today's world a country's image is critically important to its progress and prosperity. Countries with positive images trade at a premium, and find it relatively cheap and easy to attract tourists, investors, consumers, talent and international events. Those with negative or weak images trade at a discount and struggle constantly for international attention, recognition and respect.

National image is a complex phenomenon that governments must not ignore: it is their license to trade internationally, a reflection of their good, or bad, governance, and their passport to a hyperconnected, interdependent world.

In order to shed some light on this critical component of international relations I have been publishing the annual Anholt Nation Brands Index, since 2005. The NBI is an in-depth survey of international perceptions of 60 countries, using a sample representing more than 70 percent of the world's population. It has accumulated over 1.5 billion datapoints, providing a wealth of



fascinating insights into the structure and dynamics of national reputation.

At first glance, the NBI is not one of the most exciting social surveys: from one year to the next, the rank order of countries changes remarkably little. But this apparent stability is misleading. In truth, the overall ranking is one of the NBI's less important indicators: it shows only how highly everyone on earth (on average) rates (on average) each country in the list. The really valuable data lies deeper, revealing how specific groups of

**The ascent of South Korea's technology and automotive brands, coupled with the global phenomenon of K-pop and TV dramas, has significantly bolstered the country's international reputation and standing. AFP**



people around the world adjust their views, from year to year, about specific aspects of countries, such as their governance or population, their culture or landscape, their investment climate or their educational opportunities. Looking at a country's image in the NBI is like looking at pond water: it appears perfectly still to the naked eye, but seen through a microscope it is teeming with life.

## MAKE WAY FOR ASIA

Given the general stability of the NBI's overall ranking, it is always worth taking a closer look when it does change, especially on those very rare occasions when the front-runner is replaced.

In the most recent edition of the NBI, Japan comes top in the overall ranking. This is the first time that a non-Western country has occupied first place, which in previous years has always been the preserve of Germany or the US.<sup>1</sup>

Considering where Japan has come from, geopolitically speaking, during the past century, this is as remarkable an achievement as Germany becoming the most admired

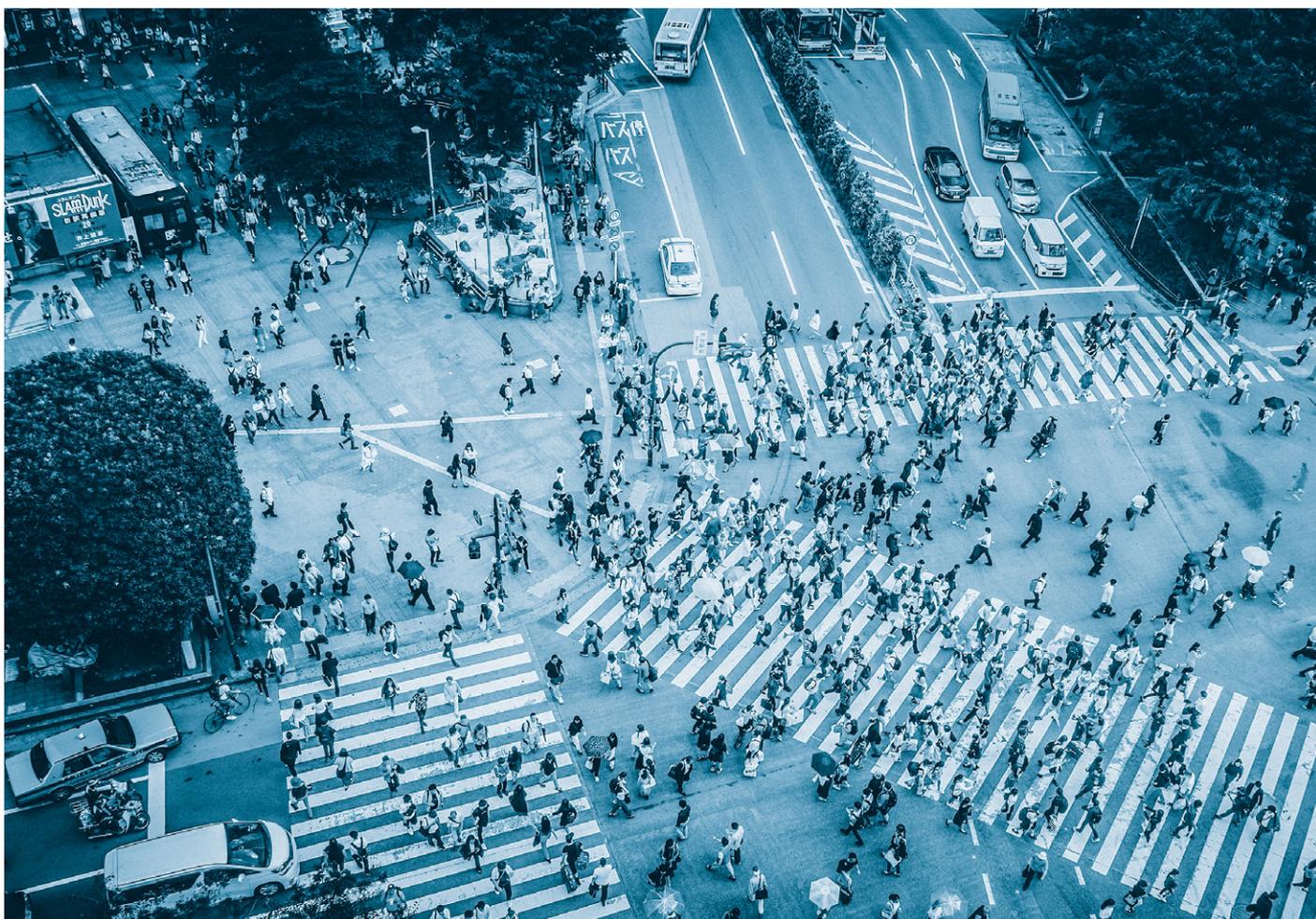
**The COVID pandemic detrimentally impacted the rankings of certain countries, exemplified by China's significant decline of 11 places to 35th in 2020, marking an unparalleled descent in the history of the NBI.**  
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country back in 2007. In fact, the stories of these two countries' steady rise from pariah to paragon in barely two generations have some important parallels: the renunciation of violence, a determinedly ethical foreign policy, a vigorously renewed and responsible engagement with the international community, and the rapid growth of high-quality branded consumer and industrial exports. The contest between these two countries may well continue to dominate the top slots of the NBI for years to come.

It is tempting to ask whether this is an early sign of the dawning of the "Asian Century" that pundits have been predicting for so many years.<sup>2</sup>

The hypothesis is reinforced by the equally impressive performance of another East Asian nation brand: South Korea. True, it ranks a long way down the list, in 24th place, so the two countries may not appear to have much in common. But a look at South Korea's scores over the full 18-year lifetime of the NBI reveals that by a significant margin it has been the fastest-growing and most-improved nation brand in the list.

Surprisingly, all the country images



measured in the NBI actually tend to improve over time (with the sole exception of Russia). I have always assumed that this is a natural consequence of globalization: with every year that passes, we all get a little more used to the idea that we share this planet with other nations, peoples and cultures. And quite often familiarity gradually evolves into curiosity, acceptance and, finally, trust and respect.

While some countries struggle to keep up with the pack, a group of about 15 countries has consistently improved on the general upward trend. Among these most-improved brands, South Korea has posted a huge score increase of 9.49 points over the past 14 years — more than double the average.

But the story does not end with Japan and South Korea. Four of the five most-improved nation brands over the past 18 years are East Asian: South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Indonesia.

We cannot speak about an “Asian Century” without also looking at China’s image, which presents a more complex and more volatile picture. China’s average global image jumped from 28th position in 2008 to 22nd in 2009 (the Summer Olympics may well have

**People are attracted to other countries for a variety of factors. A steadily increasing segment of the global population looks Eastward, seeking inspiration from its societal paradigms, aspirational lifestyles, and rich cultures.**  
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contributed to this) and retained 23rd or 24th place for the whole of the following decade. But in 2020, after the pandemic struck, China’s global ranking dopped by a massive 11 places to 35th, an unprecedented fall in the history of the NBI.

It seems that disturbing the international order, whether by accident or by design, is something that international public opinion simply will not tolerate. Countries that go to war or offend other populations tend to be similarly penalized in the NBI. China has not yet recovered its previous position and still languishes in 31st place today.

As America’s results have also shown over the course of the NBI, the images of major powers are inherently more volatile than those of smaller countries, for the simple reason that they appear more relevant to people’s daily lives around the world.

Why are Japan and Korea doing so well?

If the NBI really is foretelling the dawn of a new era in world affairs, where an ever-growing proportion of humanity looks toward the East rather than the West for its models of society and its most aspirational lifestyles and cultures, it is worth asking what



**Middle Eastern cuisine is becoming integral to the Arab world's identity, with its dishes swiftly ascending to rank among the world's most beloved culinary delights.** Shutterstock

might be driving such a change.

It is no great mystery what Korea has done right. It is the rise in prestige and prominence of its technology and automotive brands. It is the wave of K-pop and TV dramas spreading Korea's popular culture worldwide. It is Korean food taking its place among the world's most popular cuisines. It is the growth of inbound tourism. It is the greatly increased overseas assistance that Korea provides. It is Korea's ever more active participation in regional security and global governance. And the story of Japan's rise to prominence and global affection contains very similar ingredients, albeit on a larger scale and over a longer period.

Indeed, a general analysis of the image drivers in the NBI shows that people are attracted to other countries by exactly such attributes as these: advanced technology; world-class product and graphic design; wealth, success and social progress; a peaceful, educated and law-abiding population; striking landscapes and desirable tourism offerings; fine food; a rich, distinctive cultural heritage. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore,

Vietnam, Thailand and China all tick several or, in some cases, most of these boxes.

But more important than any other factor, as the NBI has shown, is a country's perceived role in the community of nations. As I wrote in an earlier Research Report for Arab News, "by a very wide margin, the most likely reason why somebody would admire a country is because they believe it contributes consistently to the world outside its own borders; that it does a good job of balancing its domestic and international responsibilities; that it is fundamentally motivated by positive values and principles. That it is, in other words, a good neighbor and a good team player."<sup>3</sup>

It is no simple matter to determine whether a country meets these criteria or not. Japan and Korea rank at 34th and 37th place in the latest edition of the Good Country Index, which I set up in 2014 to measure what each nation contributes to, or detracts from, the common good of humanity, suggesting that their real contribution to the world outside their borders is fairly high. To rank in the mid- to low-thirties in a list of 169 countries is a good result, but they still have



The Gulf states are emerging as symbols not only of wealth and success, but also of their vibrant culinary scene, rich cultural legacy, and thriving tourism industry. AFP

some way to go before they can challenge Western Europe and particularly the Nordic countries in terms of their contribution to tackling global challenges.<sup>4</sup>

The “Eastwards shift” is part attraction and part repulsion. As East Asian countries appeal ever more strongly to the tastes of populations worldwide, so those populations are turning away from what is more and more often described as the hypocrisy of the West and North.<sup>5</sup> These are the countries that still inhabit the upper reaches of the Nation Brands Index, but whose lead over the others is slipping a little more with each year.

In an increasingly turbulent and multipolar world, where international relations are increasingly transactional and self-interested rather than attempting or claiming to be values-based, and fashion cycles are driven ever faster by social media, another possibility is an increasingly volatile NBI, in which popular respect and admiration for other countries flits from one continent to another, based on ever more temporary and superficial criteria.

## WHO ELSE IS WINNING — AND LOSING?

So who is making way for Asia’s rise? Since the US last occupied the NBI’s top slot in 2017, its overall ranking has averaged between sixth and seventh place — a really significant drop from its nearly continuous occupation of the top spot over the previous eight years. It is by no means easy to imagine the US regaining its previous “most admired country” status any time soon (although much will depend on who wins the next presidential elections: America is one of the very few countries whose international image is affected by its domestic politics). The fall of Brand America in the NBI rankings also has a claim to being an observation of history in the making, another sign of the end of the post-Second World War international order and the dominance of the West.

No other region appears to be in a position to challenge East Asia’s rise in popularity. A number of Latin American countries score well on the “softer” image factors, such as landscape, cuisine, people and culture, but

suffer from weak or negative perceptions of their economic, environmental, technological and administrative assets, and on their social and political stability and security. The images of most African and Central Asian countries follow a similar pattern and are also much weaker and more negative; public opinion around the world is barely able to distinguish one state from another in these regions.

South Asia, with the exception of India (which, like China, is a case apart,) also suffers from similar problems, being generally perceived as colorful, but not competent. In the Arab world, the Gulf states are associated with wealth, success and, increasingly, with cuisine, cultural heritage and tourism.

As long as the status quo of country image continues to shift, it seems that there is no other direction for it to move but toward East Asia. And since economic growth tends to follow where mass popularity leads, it is a workable hypothesis that Japan ranking first in the Nation Brands Index is indeed an early indication that an Asian Century is waiting in the wings.



Once atop the NBI index until 2017, the US's brand suffered from years of political chaos, signaling a potential shift away from Western dominance. AFP

It will certainly make our world a very different place, culturally, economically and politically, from the one in which we have lived for the past two centuries. One can only hope that it proves also to be a more peaceful, united and productive one.

## NOTES

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