

Nov 04, 2016 by **Nicholas J. Cull**

## **South Korea's Other Problem** <sup>[1]</sup>

This summer much global attention has focused on South Korea's biggest problem: its northern neighbor with his nuclear missiles and penchant for detaining American journalists. But South Korea has another problem: its international reputation. South Korea now has an economy approaching one of the ten largest in the world but falls short of the top thirty on the indices of brand reputation. Korea's image has lagged behind the reality of its economic and political transformation over the last twenty years. The new government of former Hyundai executive, President Lee Myung Bak has responded by creating the Presidential Council on Nation Branding, an impressive brain trust of officials, scholars and business stars with the power to coordinate and reinforce Korea's existing mechanisms of public diplomacy.

At a recent conference on the Korean brand, the Council's Chairman - former University President Dr. Euh Yoon-Dae - declared his intent to raise Korea's brand from 35th to 15th in the world. While the Council's approach includes the rather futile task of finding a new national slogan (to replace the impactful investment oriented brand 'Dynamic, Korea' and its oddly campy tourist oriented counterpart, 'Korea, Sparkling') most of its plans seemed right on the money. It is especially encouraging to learn of the emphasis which the council plans to place on improving the experience of foreigners resident in Korea. The isolation experienced by many foreign workers in a very homogenous country has long been one of the deficiencies of the Korean brand.

Another priority for the council is investment in Korea's international voices: the privately operated English language newspapers, the *Korea Times* and *Korea Herald*, whose online versions are the preeminent source for foreigners seeking to learn more about the country, and South Korea's foreign language satellite TV channel: Arirang TV. Arirang has particular potential. The channel is the creation of the non-governmental Korean International Broadcasting Foundation. Its English language programming has been accessible on foreign satellites since 1999, and within the last few months the channel has reached Direct TV line-ups in New York City and Los Angeles. Its output is sufficiently impressive to have been used as a model by nascent Japanese international broadcasters, but Arirang still has a long way to go. International audiences expect a level of objectivity from international broadcasters, not least in the portrayal of the affairs of the country of origin. The absence of such a culture of objectivity from all the external services emanating from East Asia accounts for their limited reach. Arirang is ten times better than China's CCTV 9 but a sizeable advantage will accrue to the East Asian nation whose broadcasts are a thousand times better. The great prize is to create the 'Asian Al Jazeera' or 'Asian CNN'. While the Presidential Council's cash will doubtless help Arirang, a better injection might be one of editorial spirit (or license) to deliver a vision of Korea and the world which the world will find compelling.

Maybe the most encouraging element of the Council's plan is a pledge to increase Korean aid to the world. Vietnam has been selected as the first country to receive massively increased development assistance. Dr. Euh speaks movingly about an awareness of the wonderful things that development has brought to Korea and the need to share the same benefits with

others. What is least encouraging is the suggestion that one mechanism to advance Korea in the international brand leagues might be to simply change the leagues. The Council has commissioned Samsung to develop a rival to the market leading index, the Anholt-GFK Roper nation brand index. The result looks suspiciously like Simon Anholt's original formulation with a few extra tweaks to spread the criteria of analysis into areas of comparative strength for Korea. Present at the unveiling of the Korean formulation, Anholt was skeptical not only of the originality of the index but of the viability of lifting any nation twenty places.

In the last analysis public diplomacy and brand initiatives can only do so much. The key question is not 'How does Korea wish to portray itself' but 'What does Korea want to be?' One role available to South Korea is that of the Middle Power: the global citizen, self-confident, stable and content 'in its own skin', whose foreign policy is relevant to the international community, which acts not for transparent material gain, but because it is right to do good in the world. Such a role is more appealing to an international audience than a crude national desire to merely outstrip Japan or to fix market perceptions so that the country can charge more money for its flat screen TVs.

Changes in international reputation take time. Korea is not the only nation seeking to maintain its image. The nations whose brand position is coveted by South Korea are in no hurry to abandon their status. The government will need to be patient. Part of success in public diplomacy is trusting to the institutions one already has in place and allowing them the time and budget they need to deliver. Korea's cultural diplomacy agency - the Korea Foundation - looks underfunded when its budget is compared per capita of population to international counterparts like the British Council or Germany's Goethe Institute.

As Simon Anholt has noted, radical shifts in national 'brand' standing are few and require radical changes in the country. The impressive quality of Korean manufacturing is not a sufficiently compelling story to bring such a shift. The only story with the power to catapult Korea into the higher ranks of the global imagination is the reunification of South and North Korea into a single, democratic entity. This is one more reason for South Korea to reach out to its neighbor in peace. It is possible to imagine a united Korea of the future - no longer restrained by the cross currents of Northern behavior - commanding unprecedented respect in the world. In such a future, a strong international brand would be only one of Korea's rewards.

*Editors note: For additional reading on Korea's public diplomacy, read David Kang's article "Korea's Emotional Diplomacy" in the Summer 2009 issue of PD.*

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