

MEDIA IN REVIEW

# Radio Free Asia Takes Aim

by Kevin J. McNamara

**F**or advocates of human rights, East Asia is at once a fountain of hope and a slough of despair.

Sparkling and pure—at least by comparison with other countries of lesser democratization—are Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Soiled by tyranny and sunk in oppression are North Korea, China, Burma, Vietnam, and Laos.

These latter nations have provided the severest test of the Clinton administration's vow to make the promotion of democracy and human rights a pillar of U.S. foreign policy.

Clinton's chief—some would say his only—lasting initiative on behalf of democracy in the region is Radio Free Asia, a U.S. government-supported surrogate domestic radio station for the region. As it prepares to observe the one-year anniversary of its first broadcast this September, the radio station appears to have won an audience in Asia while eluding enemies at home and abroad.

Scores of former dissidents, analysts, and statesmen believe shortwave radio broadcasts helped nurture democracy behind the Iron Curtain. The BBC, Deutsche Welle, and Voice of America (VOA)—but especially the surrogate domestic services of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)—are thought to have deprived Soviet-bloc regimes of a monopoly of information, undermined popular trust in communist rule, and spawned dissident movements that grew in power.

In *The Grand Failure: The Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, former U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski declared, "The loss of communist monopoly over mass communications is the key to the breakdown of communist totalitarianism."

Poland's Lech Walesa, the Czech Republic's Václav Havel, and Alexander Dubcek, leader of the abortive Prague Spring, all described Western radio broadcasts as critical to their success in overthrowing Soviet rule.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn cited their importance, as did former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who was forced to turn to the BBC, Radio Liberty, and VOA for information during the 1991 Soviet coup attempt.

## Chill winds from Asia

In the wake of the massacre in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989, therefore, Congress turned America's antennas to the East by creating an agency modeled after Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty.

The chief target was China. The original legislative proposal for Radio Free Asia, introduced by Rep. John Porter (R-Illinois), founder of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, would have called it Radio Free China. Yet much of East Asia is ruled by communist or authoritarian regimes. Although the Cold War in Europe is over, chill winds continue to blow across East Asia.

Accordingly, Congress authorized the RFA to broadcast to



COURTESY RADIO FREE ASIA

■ *Many voices of freedom:* Broadcasters of Radio Free Asia's Vietnamese service, one of seven different sections at the station, prepare a program at the RFA's Washington, D.C., studios.

Burma, Cambodia, China, Laos, North Korea, Tibet, and Vietnam. According to Freedom House, which rates political rights and civil liberties in all nations on a scale of one (most free) to seven (not free), the countries served by the RFA consistently rate sixes or sevens. None are even "partly free," according to Freedom House, though Cambodia is considered an emerging, albeit highly fragile, democracy.

Burma, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam likewise languish at the very bottom of the 150 nations ranked in the *1997 Index of Economic Freedom*, published by the Heritage Foundation and the *Wall Street Journal*. Cambodia's and China's economies score slightly higher yet are categorized as "mostly not free." The index did not rank Tibet, the territory in China whose people seek autonomy from Beijing.

Congress created Radio Free

Asia in 1994 when it consolidated all nonmilitary, government overseas broadcasters—such as the RFA, VOA, RFE/RL, and Radio and TV Martí—under a Broadcasting Board of Governors and created the International Broadcasting Bureau within the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). The RFA and RFE/RL are private, nonprofit corporations that receive federal grants from the Broadcasting Board of Governors, while the VOA and the others are under the USIA.

Richard Richter, a former executive at ABC and CBS News who most recently served as executive producer at WETA, the Washington, D.C., public television station, was recruited as president of the RFA. Dan Southerland, former Beijing bureau chief for the *Washington Post*, was selected as the RFA's executive editor and vice president.

Radio Free Asia's programs differ significantly from the VOA's in that they emphasize developments inside such countries as China, serving as a surrogate domestic radio station. The broadcasts are considered more relevant to their information-starved listeners than the American-style fare on the VOA.

Broadcasting in English and local languages, the VOA features American news, international news, and State Department editorials in addition to a modest quantity of "local" news.

Southerland estimates that 95 percent of the RFA's programs focus on people and events within the countries in which the broadcast is heard, compared to 15–25 percent of the VOA's programs. The RFA is also independent of government control, while some say that the USIA's control of the VOA has had a stifling effect in the past.

doing some work in television, and we didn't want to saddle the organization with a name that emphasizes radio."

Members of Congress objected strongly—and the Radio Free Asia name survived.

### Reception overseas . . .

Radio Free Asia has met with a chilly reception from the dictatorial regimes in East Asia, chief among them Beijing. They have had limited success in hindering the station's operations but have not silenced it.

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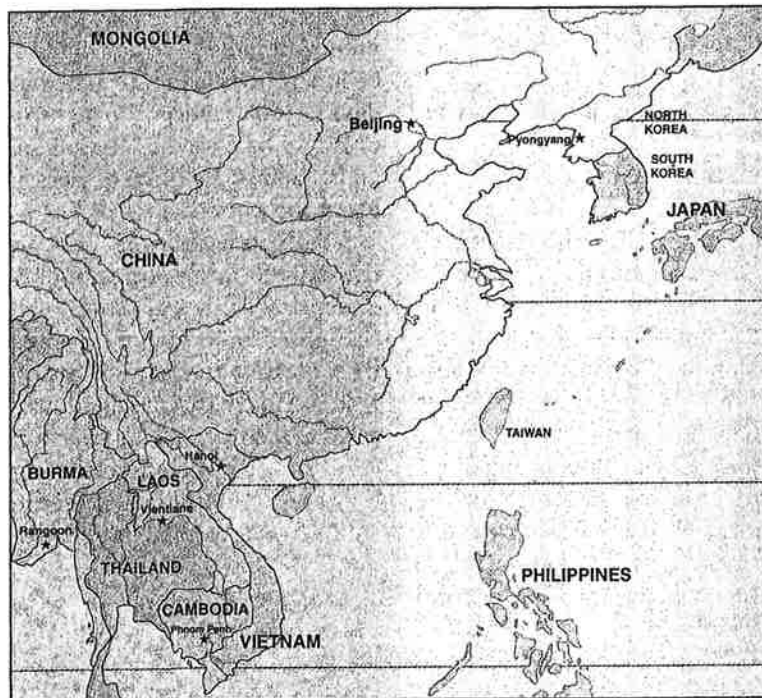
paganda warfare against China." The following year, Beijing erected so many obstacles in its path that a U.S. commission studying the feasibility of the RFA was forced to cancel a planned trip to Beijing.

Once the RFA was established, Richter said, Chinese diplomats visited his office on two separate occasions to demand the locations of his transmitters.

"It seemed to me that they obviously received instructions from Beijing to find out," Richter said. He refused to reveal the transmitters' location but conceded that any engineer "worth his salt" could pinpoint them.

Since then, the RFA president confirmed, Beijing has successfully pressured Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Thailand to deny the station use of local transmitters for its Chinese broadcasts, though not for other languages.

The RFA employs nine transmitters, five of them broadcasting to China. As a result, Richter said, the RFA is heard among China's 1.2 billion people and most of the other 155 million people it serves. Richter conceded that added broadcasts would strain the RFA's transmitter capacity but said a new transmitter for both the VOA and the RFA is scheduled for construction



■ **Mapping out news-freedom targets:** During the past year, Radio Free Asia began broadcasting to Tibet, plus six East Asian nations (tan-shaded area).

news and information about internal events in Asian countries.”

Bush's USIA director, Henry Catto, said of the RFA, "I'd be surprised to see it come to pass, because a complete new surrogate broadcasting operation would be hugely expensive, at least \$100 million." (The RFA had start-up costs of \$10 million and has an annual budget of \$9.3 million.)

Recently, U.S. Ambassador to China James Sasser said, "Far be it from me to tell Congress what they ought to do, but in this age of trying to streamline government, and in an age of budget austerity, the case could be made that there's duplication of effort here."

What of the China hands and diplomats who warn against rupturing ties to China? In response, the initial U.S. task force created to study the RFA proposal said in its 1991 report, "The history of the past few decades suggests that diplomacy helped keep the world safe; ideas helped make the world free."

The argument that Washington needs to avoid offending Beijing suffered a blow when the architect of U.S. China policy, Richard Nixon, wrote in *Seize the Moment*: "Chinese hard-liners . . . thrive on isolation because it means guaranteed and unquestioned power for them. . . . Rather than playing into their hands, we should promote peaceful change, just as we do in other countries around the world."

Nixon added that "we can

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assist the forces of freedom best through broadcasts of news and information, not just about the world at large, but particularly about the internal situation in China." Not only did Nixon advocate the creation of a Radio Free China, he backed a Radio Free Tibet, to boot.

### Support solidifying

Circumstances, too, are conspiring to support the RFA. The agency may benefit, for instance, from recent placements of possible allies in key posts in the State-USIA-VOA bureaucracy. The new director of the VOA, for instance, is Evelyn Lieberman, a former aide to Biden, the RFA's chief supporter in the Senate.

In addition, the new head of the USIA's International Broadcasting Bureau is Kevin Klose, former president of the other surrogate domestic service, the RFE/RL, which, one congressional source said, "effectively makes him the chief operating officer for the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees all of these organizations."

And the urge to do something

on behalf of human rights tends to guarantee the RFA continued support. In 1992, Clinton lambasted Bush for coddling communist China, declaring that "no American foreign policy can succeed if it slights our commitment to democracy."

In 1994, Clinton reversed himself and awarded China most-favored-nation (MFN) trading status despite its human-rights violations.

With the clash over renewing MFN for China coming up year after year, therefore, Radio Free Asia continues to be important to Clinton—and other U.S. officials—who want to be seen as doing something on behalf of human rights.

But the bottom line, of course, will always be not the RFA's utility to Washington politicians but its benefit to the hundreds of millions of Asians whose governments routinely withhold truthful news. These people are the real winners. ■

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