



THE PENINSULA

How Closing VOA and RFA Undermines U.S. Influence in North

Korea

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Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA) are two news agencies funded by the U.S. federal government that provide information to global audiences, especially those in countries without free and independent media. But in mid-March, President Donald Trump issued an [executive order](#) that targeted their funding. Their parent agency, the United States Agency for Global Media (USAGM), was among the government organizations ordered to “reduce the performance of their statutory functions and associated personnel to the minimum presence and function required by law.”

The move “undermines America’s long-standing commitment to a free and independent press,” [said the National Press Club \(NPC\)](#), a journalism advocacy group in the United States. “If an entire newsroom can be sidelined overnight, what does that say about the state of press freedom?” The president’s decision to shutter these agencies is a mistake and should be reversed because of their important role in the Indo-Pacific region broadly and on the Korean Peninsula in particular.

VOA emerged during World War II as part of the United States’ strategy to push back against Axis propaganda and misinformation campaigns. The first VOA radio program was broadcast on February 1, 1942, according to [research done by Chris Kerns](#), a former director of the Office of Computing Services. The service was originally under the Coordinator of Information, which Kerns says was responsible for “both the collection of

information...and the transmission of propaganda...to both American and foreign populations.” Its sister service, RFA, was established after the Cold War and had a similar mission of reporting on information suppressed by authoritarian governments.

The International Broadcasting Act of 1994 created both services because Congress believed that “the creation of a new broadcasting service to the people of the People’s Republic of China and other countries of Asia...would enhance the promotion of information and ideas, while advancing the goals of United States foreign policy.” The bill outlined two objectives: to “provide accurate and timely information, news, and commentary about events in the respective countries of Asia and elsewhere” and to “be a forum for a variety of opinions and voices from within Asian nations whose people do not fully enjoy freedom of expression.” Since their establishment, both VOA and RFA have been instrumental in providing information to countries with limited press freedom. RFA, in particular, was recognized by the Senate for its reporting on North Korea, including its nuclear weapons program, human rights violations, and handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. “High-level defectors and refugees from North Korea have credited reports by Radio Free Asia as a factor in their decision to leave the country and seek their future beyond the North Korean borders,” said a Senate resolution in 2022.

Both VOA and RFA provide critical information to Koreans on both halves of the peninsula. Its benefits for North Koreans are fairly straightforward. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) rank North Korea 177 out of 180 in its index of press freedom. “The regime tightly controls the production and distribution of information and strictly prohibits independent journalism,” RSF observes. Counterintuitively, the services are also helpful to Koreans south of the demilitarized zone. Especially during the pandemic, VOA and RFA were some of only a few news outlets reporting the on-the-ground situation in North Korea. Access to North Korean sources is strictly controlled in the South despite the country’s robust media ecosystem. Without VOA and RFA, there would otherwise be a dearth of even Korean-language reporting on North Korea.

VOA and RFA are also important for advancing U.S. foreign policy objectives in the region. CSIS Associate Fellow Japhet Quitzon says their reach is critical for shaping public opinion in the Indo-Pacific, given their wide reach. “With reduced funding and staffing, these services will no longer be able to highlight opposition voices, promote U.S. values, or counter state censorship and disinformation,” he writes. Along with the closure of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Trump administration’s foreign policy priorities, “the United States has few concrete outlets for influence remaining, and its reputation and perceived reliability will suffer.” As noted above, VOA and RFA’s impact on North Korea deserves particular notice, given the central government’s stranglehold on information in the society. Defectors have spoken about how the government ordered the public execution of North Koreans consuming outside information like RFA broadcasts. “An overt information warfare campaign cannot only support deterrence and diplomacy, but it can also create a dilemma for Kim Jong Un and cause pressure that leads to changes in behavior and decision-making or simply a change inside North Korea,” Colonel David Maxwell told VOA in 2022.

It remains to be seen whether VOA and RFA will be fully dissolved or whether Congress will intervene. At the end of April, a district judge ordered the Trump administration to reverse its funding cuts, though both organizations remain in limbo. Some staff have returned to

work at various services under USAGM, and the [RFA English website](#) says they are “providing limited news updates on our website and social media.” However, VOA has not updated their website since March 15.

President Trump should rescind his executive order and allow VOA and RFA, as well as their sister services, to resume their vital work. From the perspective of oppressed people in the Indo-Pacific, especially the North Korean people, the value of these services cannot be calculated in dollars and cents. They share information that would otherwise be inaccessible to them from both their local communities and the wider world. They also allow these individuals to share their stories, which would go unnoticed due to their authoritarian governments. President Trump should not turn his back on the United States’ longstanding record of promoting democracy and liberty in the world.

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Return to the Peninsula

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