

# CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

## Radio Free Asia: Background, Funding, and Policy Issues

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### Summary

In response to some Asian countries' human rights violations and to promote democracy in countries such as China and North Korea, the Administration and the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress agreed that the United States should increase broadcasting to this part of the world. The International Broadcasting Act of 1994, title III of the Foreign Relations Authorizations Act of 1994/95 (P.L. 103-236), created the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) under the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) and authorized the Board to make grants available to conduct surrogate broadcasting services<sup>1</sup> (referred to as Radio Free Asia or RFA) to the People's Republic of China, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, North Korea, Tibet, and Vietnam.

In 1997, lawmakers who opposed Beijing sought ways of promoting democracy and human rights in China other than through denying normal trade relation (NTR) trade benefits. One suggestion was to dramatically increase funds to expand Radio Free Asia and Voice of America (VOA) broadcasting into China. The Radio Free Asia Act of 1998 (title XXXIX, P.L. 105-261) authorized \$22 million for broadcasting in FY1999, plus \$8 million for one-time capital costs. Congress appropriated \$22 million in FY1999 for RFA to expand its broadcasting to 24 hours a day into China and continue broadcasting into five other Asian target countries. For FY2000, the President's budget request for RFA and the Senate appropriation (S. 1217) are \$23 million. On October 1, 1999, as a result of the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998, the BBG will become an independent agency in order to maintain its journalistic integrity while the rest of USIA will merge into the Department of State.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. surrogate broadcasting provides independent, uncensored, and accurate news and information of events in the targeted country (often a closed society), as well as cultural programs of that country. Surrogate broadcasting includes Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Inc. In contrast, general broadcasting, carried out by Voice of America, presents a reliable source of international news, American policies and culture to listeners overseas.

## Background

The idea of U.S. surrogate broadcasting in Asia dates back to the Korean War and was again raised during the Vietnam War. Interest in creating a broadcast service to Asia re-emerged after the Chinese government's 1989 crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square. In December 1991, *The President's Task Force on International Broadcasting* recommended increasing U.S. surrogate broadcasting activities into the People's Republic of China, as did *The Commission on Broadcasting to the People's Republic of China* in September 1992. A third U.S. government committee, *The U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy*, recommended in August 1992 enhancing VOA broadcasting to China.

In early 1993, the Administration sought in its FY1994 budget request \$30 million for the creation of a surrogate service which was referred to as Radio Free Asia. On June 15, 1993, the President announced his proposal for a major consolidation of U.S. nonmilitary, international broadcasting, including the creation of a new "Asian Democracy Radio."

Throughout that year the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress debated whether, and how, to broadcast into Asia. Proponents of surrogate broadcasting into Asia argued that: 1) it would promote democracy, especially in China where political repression and government control of news is strong, 2) freer and more open countries would enhance U.S. bilateral relations in Asia, and 3) the United States has an obligation to promote freedom around the world, not just in Europe. Opponents claimed that China is a much more open society with many sources of information, unlike Europe and the Soviet Union in the 1950s when Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) was established. Expanding Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts rather than creating a surrogate service would be less expensive and less confrontational, they contended, reducing the possible reaction by Asian governments of digging in their heels and moving even further away from democratic principles.

After numerous hearings and debates, Congress authorized the idea of a Radio Free Asia surrogate broadcasting entity in the United States International Broadcasting Act of 1994 -- title III of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995 (H.R. 2333, signed into law on April 30, 1994, as P.L. 103-236). The law stipulated that no grant could be made to RFA unless, 1) a detailed plan on the formation of RFA is sent to Congress within ninety days after the confirmation of the Broadcasting Board of Governors; and 2) the plan certifies that RFA can be established and operate with grants of no more than \$22 million in any fiscal year, with one-time capital costs of no more than \$8 million. Radio Free Asia would assume all obligations, not the U.S. government, and grants would end after September 30, 1999, unless the President's budget submission to Congress recommends a one year extension as authorized in sec. 309(g) of P.L. 103-236.

Eighteen months later, the BBG sent the required RFA plan to Congress (November 15, 1995) after some in Congress expressed concern that the Administration was stonewalling on the issue. RFA's plan asserted that it would be possible to establish a surrogate broadcasting service into Asian countries within the budget set forth by Congress and that it would be broadcasting "as soon as possible". The plan stated that full time staff for FY1995 and FY1996 would not exceed 45 in Washington, D.C. and 110

independent contractors. The BBG also set out several recommendations: that funding for an Asia surrogate service continue under the BBG; that the new entity be created as a private U.S. corporation using existing transmitters, where possible; that the new service be named the Asia Pacific Network (APN); that the entity establish its headquarters in Washington, D.C. with an office in Asia; and that it begin operation as soon as transmission site issues are resolved and staff hired.

Despite congressional objections to altering the Radio Free Asia name, as cited by law, the broadcasting service was incorporated on March 11, 1996, as the Asia Pacific Network (Radio Free Asia), Inc. In the following months, Congress reasserted that Radio Free Asia is the authorized name.

The first RFA broadcast took place on September 29, 1996, broadcasting into China in Mandarin. The initial broadcasts of one hour at 7:00 a.m. and one hour at 11:00 p.m. included regional news and feature stories. The Chinese government reacted to the initial broadcasts with strongly worded letters of opposition to top level U.S. government officials, as well as editorials in major Chinese newspapers claiming that the CIA is behind the broadcast operation.

## **Current Status**

RFA's Uyghur, Wu, and Cantonese programs were added most recently, in 1998, in response to the desire of Congress, under the Radio Free Asia Act of 1998, to increase broadcasting in other languages to China in addition to Mandarin and Tibetan. By the end of FY1999, RFA will be broadcasting 24 hours a day into China: 12 hours/day of Mandarin, 3 hours/day of Cantonese, 8 hours/day of Tibetan and 1 hour/day of Uyghur.

From the beginning of RFA, the Chinese government vigorously opposed this surrogate broadcasting, asserting that the U.S. is using broadcasting to impose its values on Asian citizens and interfere in Asian countries' internal affairs. China began jamming RFA Mandarin broadcasts in most frequencies on August 18, 1997. The government also began jamming Tibetan broadcasts in early October, 1997. Earlier, Vietnam had begun jamming the Vietnamese broadcasts in February, 1997; and North Korea also had begun jamming the Korean broadcasts in June, 1997. The Chinese government is also jamming RFA's Uyghur and Cantonese broadcasts. In all of these cases, jamming has been continual, but with varying degrees of effectiveness. RFA currently is broadcasting into China via multiple transmission sites and on varying frequencies, keeping the probability of China government jamming at a minimum. The broadcast entity has been successful in averting some, but not all, of the jamming.

In October 1998 RFA launched its website, which provides the audio broadcasts as well as additional written material. There is evidence that the Vietnamese and Chinese governments have since tried to block internet access and have been successful at blocking it in many places. The BBG's January 15, 1999 report to Congress focused on the continuing efforts of RFA to counter the suppression of its programming.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Radio Free Asia Broadcasting to China, report to Congress pursuant to Section 3903, P.L. (continued...)

In another report to Congress dated April 16, 1999, the BBG said the RFA was cost effective and successful in reaching its listeners. Despite logistical and security difficulties, in 1998 a private research organization was able to conduct audience surveys on Chinese listenership of RFA's Mandarin broadcasts. According to the three-site survey, among all international broadcasters, only VOA and the BBC (both of which have been on the air since the 1940s), as well as the Taiwan government radio station, had a higher listenership than RFA.<sup>3</sup>

Until 1998, all RFA transmitter sites had been leased. In 1998 and early 1999, RFA obtained permanent sites on the islands of Saipan and Tinian, respectively, in the Northern Marianas. Although U.S. broadcast sites in Thailand and the Philippines would be excellent transmission points for RFA, both countries have blocked usage, a right given them in bilateral accords. Their reasons have to do with an unwillingness to anger China and some ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nation) governments.

An underlying principle for Radio Free Asia hiring is that it is to be a lean organization. Full time employees initially were to number 109, but the staff totals, in both the field and in Washington, have grown to 230 as a result of increased broadcasts to China and the realization that the original staffing goals would not sustain more than token programming. The President of RFA is Richard Richter, formerly a producer and executive producer of news programs at ABC, CBS, and WETA. Dan Southerland, previously a Beijing bureau chief for *The Washington Post*, and a Hong Kong bureau chief for the *Christian Science Monitor* and Vietnam correspondent for *United Press International*, is Vice President of Programming and Executive Editor. Because USIA will be dissolved on October 1, 1999, 66 full-time permanent positions will be transferred from USIA to the BBG.

Each language service has a chief; the Mandarin service, because of its size, also has a deputy. Total personnel for each service includes: Mandarin, 33; Tibetan, 23; Burmese, 16; Vietnamese, 15; Korean, 14; Khmer, 11; Uyghur, 4; Cantonese, 9; and the Laotian service, 11. The Wu broadcast takes place as part of the Mandarin service. RFA's headquarters are located in Washington, D.C. It has expanded its bureau in Hong Kong and has additional smaller offices in Tokyo, Phnom Penh, Dharamsala (India), Bangkok, and Seoul. RFA reporters, or stringers, are also located throughout Asia, the United States, and Europe. All are native speakers of one of RFA's broadcast languages, as are a number of editorial consultants who are experts or commentators in specialized fields.

## Funding History

The FY1995 Commerce, Justice, State Appropriations (P.L. 103-317) provided \$10 million in multi-year funds for startup of RFA (\$5 million of which was rescinded in FY1996). The FY1996 appropriations provided a \$5 million earmark from the international broadcasting account. For FY1997, Congress earmarked \$9.3 million for RFA within the Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act of 1997. Earlier in the FY1997

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<sup>2</sup>(...continued)

105-261, January 15, 1999

<sup>3</sup> Other opinions were expressed from Chinese listeners via four call-in programs. Report to Congress, pursuant to Section 309(f) , P.L. 103-236), p. 8.

appropriations debate, Members of the House Appropriations Committee had expressed concern that RFA had not been operating within a clear plan. The Committee requested RFA to submit a plan prior to receiving grants under the FY1997 appropriations. Officials of the broadcast entity sent a plan to Congress in mid-September 1996 which the committee approved.

For FY2000, the Administration has requested a total international broadcasting budget of \$452.6 million which includes \$23.1 million for Radio Free Asia. The Senate has agreed to \$23.1 million in its appropriation bill (S. 1217). Following is the radio's funding history:

FY1995 -- \$5.0 million  
FY1996 -- \$5.0 million  
FY1997 -- \$9.3 million  
FY1998 -- \$24.1 million  
FY1999 -- \$22.0 million (estimate)  
FY2000 -- \$23.1 million (request)

### **Issues for Congress**

RFA proved to be an important source of objective information to the Chinese after the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the subsequent Chinese demonstrations at the U.S. embassy in Beijing in May, 1999. Radio Free Asia currently broadcasts for a total of 28 hours a day; the BBG plans to increase that figure to 34 hours by the end of FY1999. The issues facing the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress are: 1) authorization and appropriation of increased funding to support RFA's Chinese language expansion; 2) continual finetuning of programming and technical (transmission) support; and 3) development of reliable audience surveys.

The Clinton Administration endorses the idea of expanding RFA's budget and capabilities. Both the Administration and many in Congress believe that expanding broadcasting into China is a better way to promote democracy and human rights than denying China normal trade relation (NTR) trade benefits.

H.R. 2415, the American Embassy Security Act of 1999, would provide permanent authorization for RFA. It would also repeal funding limitations for the broadcast entity for FY2000. The Senate Foreign Relations Authorization legislation (S. 886) would reauthorize RFA through FY2005 and would raise the limit on annual expenditures to \$28 million in each of FY2000 and FY2001.

The increase in funding in FY1998 allowed RFA to expand its transmission from Saipan; also, increases in FY1998 and FY1999 allowed RFA to expand its broadcast hours and add new languages. The FY2000 budget request of just over \$23 million may allow RFA to expand its transmission sites. RFA officials believe that a slight increase in funds in FY2000 would allow them to fully function as Congress had intended in the International Broadcasting Act of 1994. Increased radio construction funds amounting to \$20.9 million requested for FY2000 (compared to \$13.2 million appropriated for FY1999) would benefit both RFA and VOA activities.

Some concerns regarding expanding the RFA budget exist. Lawmakers concerned with maintaining a balanced budget view these increases as unnecessary expenditures that would tap into the surplus which is being eyed for social security or tax cuts. Furthermore, because the proposed funding levels being debated in Congress is three times the FY1997 funding level, some fear that such a dramatic increase in a short time span to an organization that is so young could lead to an inefficient use of taxpayer dollars by RFA. Others have cited the fact that numerous similar information sources already are reaching China, including CNN; they say that increasing RFA three-fold likely would not result in a proportionate increase in democracy promotion in China. Moreover, organizations that promote U.S.-China trade assert that this action will cause further deterioration of U.S.-China relations that could dampen the future growth of U.S. exports.

In the aftermath of the May 7, 1999, NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, RFA's coverage of the bombing and demonstrations was extensive in its Mandarin, Cantonese, Tibetan, and Uyghur programs. RFA reported apologies by the U.S. and NATO, which the Chinese media had failed to mention. Listeners who responded to the call-in programs were critical of both the U.S. and the Chinese government's handling of the demonstrations. Throughout the Kosovo crisis, RFA reported on the suffering due to ethnic cleansing, which the Chinese media portrayed as a product of NATO bombing.

A matter of ongoing interest in Congress is overlap, duplication and coordination of VOA and RFA. According to Allen Heil, Deputy Director of Voice of America, RFA and VOA are closely coordinating and monitoring their activities in Asia. On September 12, 1998, VOA dropped its Mandarin broadcast during 0400-0500 gmt, the only hour of the day that it had been overlapping with the RFA broadcast. RFA agreed to broadcast during a number of non-prime hours to avoid overlapping with VOA. VOA and RFA now broadcast 12 hours each in Mandarin for a total of 24 hours per day.

Jamming of U.S. broadcasts into Asia is a concern of both administrators and Members of Congress. China government jamming of U.S. international broadcasting--both VOA and RFA--reportedly has been very effective, especially in the cities, according to Voice of America and Radio Free Asia officials. They believe that increased funding will assist U.S. broadcasters in circumventing the jamming problem. Broadcast officials admit, however, that China's jamming activity may increase proportionately to the increase in U.S. broadcasting activity there. Nevertheless, listeners who have called in to the radio programs from every Chinese province are evidence that RFA is reaching its audience.