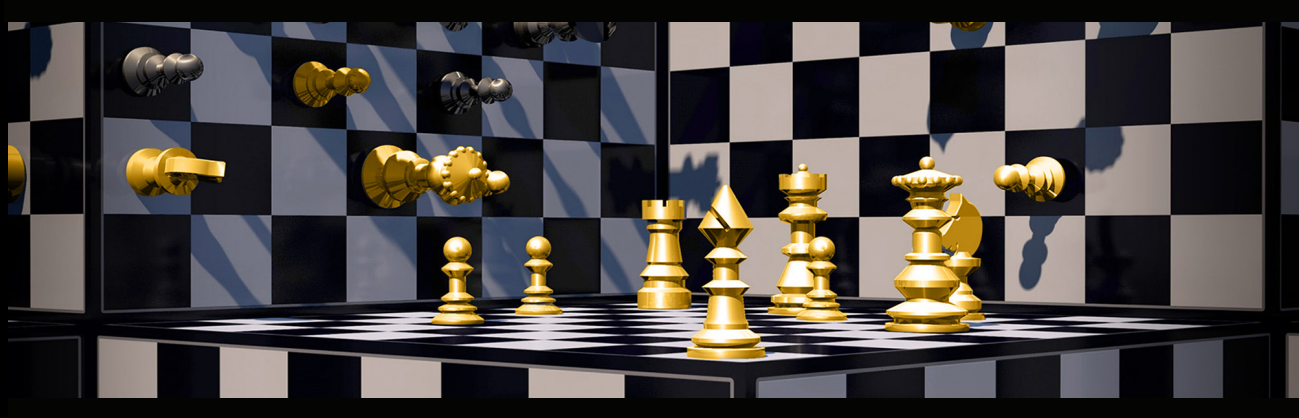




25 October 2023

PERSPECTIVES



Mememes vs. Missiles? Cognitive Access Denial and the North Korea Problem

By Steve Ferenzi, Keith Weber, and José Madera



PHOTO BY [THOMAS EVANS ON UNSPLASH](#)

North Korea's mafia state is a [persistent threat](#) to the U.S. homeland that, if left unaddressed, will metastasize and ultimately drain resources from confronting the pacing threat of China. Recent [technological developments](#), such as its first solid-fueled [intercontinental ballistic missile test](#) in April after an [unprecedented 68 missile tests in 2022](#) (ten times more than in 2021), underscore the increasing danger. Past attempts to restrain North Korea's [nuclear ambitions](#), like President Obama's "[strategic patience](#)" and President Trump's "[maximum pressure](#)" campaigns, have failed. It is time for a new approach—one that prioritizes the *information* instrument of power to support [integrated deterrence](#) and set conditions for eventual regime transition and denuclearization.





The focus should be on defeating North Korea's *cognitive access denial*—that is, penetrating the regime's wall of censorship, propaganda, and indoctrination, by converging information capabilities across domains. The [biggest threat to the Kim family regime is information](#). A multi-front information and influence campaign may prove decisive over time instead of legacy approaches that continue to fail to meet policy objectives. Indeed, [enabling access to outside information](#) must be at the core of any North Korea strategy.

This North Korea problem offers the U.S. Army the opportunity to leverage its "[information advantage](#)" capabilities that reside in its psychological operations, cyber, space, and electromagnetic warfare formations. Effective deterrence is not just about more [combined exercises](#), [missile defense systems](#), or [troops](#) on the peninsula.

The [Army's Special Operations Forces](#) and [Multi-Domain Task Forces](#)—alongside interagency, joint force, and multinational partners—can assist in cracking North Korea open to information. Equally important, the Army can [help shape narratives](#) to enable the North Korean people to take matters into their own hands. It's also an effective way to [conduct irregular warfare](#) activities to put the United States and its allies in a [position of advantage](#) in the [greater global competition](#) between democracy and authoritarianism.

Groundhog Day, or a Korean Spring?

Two trends frame the Korea problem: Pyongyang's provocations against the United States, and subsequent negotiations and sanctions by the United States in response. North Korea's "[cycle of provocation](#)" spans six decades of terrorist, conventional, and cyber attacks in conjunction with nuclear and ballistic missile testing—all designed to [extract economic and political concessions](#) from the United States and maintain internal support from the regime's elite backers.

Attempts by international coalitions to negotiate and sanction, such as the [Six-Party Talks](#) and [U.N. Security Council Resolution 2321](#), have led only to North Korea choosing to invest in further developing its nuclear capabilities. President Trump's "maximum pressure" approach, while achieving a historic bilateral dialogue, [failed to denuclearize](#) North Korea. Like Bill Murray's character in the movie *Groundhog Day*, the United States finds itself [stuck in a time loop](#) reliving the cycle yet again.

A [multi-front information and influence campaign](#) targeting regime leadership, North Korea's citizens, and international stakeholders could break this fruitless cycle. While not a completely new idea (others have proposed a "[maximum pressure 2.0](#)" that includes information and influence activities), this campaign elevates information to the primary line of effort and expands its tools.

The need for this approach rests on three essential truths. First, Kim Jong Un will never willingly denuclearize. As in all totalitarian states, the [Kim regime has a vital interest in its survival](#). Nuclear weapons provide the ultimate deterrent, and history indicates the regime will continue to buy more time to develop greater capabilities. One must only observe [Ukraine's situation today](#)—a victim of Russia's invasion after [giving up its nuclear arsenal](#) 30 years ago—to see the folly of denuclearization. Second, North Korea will not peacefully reunite with South Korea while the Kim family is in power as [any terms for such national reunification](#) would herald the dynasty's demise. Third, North Korea is part of the larger China problem. China [leverages the North Korean quagmire](#) in its favor to prevent instability on the peninsula that could complicate its Taiwan reunification efforts. New options are necessary.



Breaking the Cycle

Previous efforts to deter North Korean aggression and compel behavior change relied on hard military and economic power. But more of the same will not solve the problem. A focus on information and influence instead offers the best chance of replacing the Kim regime with one more likely to accept denuclearization and [eventual reunification](#) under [South Korean leadership](#).

An influence campaign could [facilitate nonviolent resistance](#) and induce regime fracture. Unfortunately, in [contrast to recent rebellions](#), North Korea lacks dissident elites or social movements capable of engineering the defection of disgruntled security officers, or a pan-Korean solidarity narrative to unify the people for sustained collective action. An influence campaign can shape conditions to catalyze this over time.

[Security apparatus defections are key](#)—increasing the chance of successful nonviolent action and catalytic change by nearly 60 percent. Korea experts David Maxwell and Mathew Ha note that [separating the Kim regime](#) from “second-tier leadership” is essential and can be done by sowing doubt, suggesting that the lives of North Koreans could improve if the regime changed its policies. The targeted elite could include about 1,000 military and party officials outside of the core regime who could collectively influence the outcome of any contingency. Information and narratives are critical to [undermining these power structures](#) on which the regime [depends for survival](#).

Economic and diplomatic actions would play critical reinforcing roles in encouraging regime defections and fostering internal dissent. Tailored sanctions must continue to [target organizations like Office 39](#) which orchestrate the regime’s global illicit activities and sustain the [patronage networks](#) that maintain the elite’s loyalty. Key to this combined economic and diplomatic effort would be integrating high-level North Korean officials into the information and influence efforts [as they defect](#) to capitalize on their knowledge of cracks within the regime.

Defeating Cognitive Access Denial

An influence campaign would first have to breach North Korea’s digital iron curtain, which includes [layers of state media](#) and [information control](#) that deny cognitive access to and among its population and elites. The U.S. military tends to focus on enemy [anti-access and area denial](#) systems (A2/AD)—capabilities such as integrated air and missile defense that would prevent joint force entry into a theater of war. This focus is prevalent in the [Army’s approach to “multi-domain operations”](#) which highlights the challenge of defeating such lethal systems. However, the Army is also uniquely capable of defeating cognitive access denial systems across the electro-magnetic spectrum and information environment to project influence.

The Army’s [framework of “penetrate, dis-integrate, exploit”](#) may be a useful starting point for an influence campaign in North Korea. If rudimentary techniques using [thumb drives, balloons, and commercial drones have proven so effective](#) for disseminating information across the Korean border, imagine what a full suite of cross-domain information-related capabilities can bring to the table in bridging the gap [between the physical and information environments](#).



Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF), especially its [psychological operations units](#), are tailor-made to [shape perceptions and behavior](#) in foreign audiences. By integrating military information support operations and intelligence capabilities with broader [cyber](#), electro-magnetic, and space capabilities throughout the Army and joint force, this [new “triad”](#) can deliver “[information firepower](#)” through forward-deployed units or U.S.-based action arms like the [Joint Military Information Support Operations WebOps Center](#) (“JMWC”) and [Information Warfare Center](#).

Similarly, Multi-Domain Task Forces (MDTFs) serve as the Army’s experimental counter-A2/AD platform. An MDTF contains long-range precision fires along with intelligence, information operations, cyber, electronic warfare, and space assets (“[I2CEWS](#)”)—capabilities critical to disrupting, degrading, and destroying the sensors, communications, and targeting systems that A2/AD relies upon. While its primary role is lethal fires, its information-related capabilities can serve the critical function of [facilitating entry into the information environment](#)—especially when coupled with theater assets such as the [915th Cyber Warfare Battalion](#) and newest [Theater Information Advantage Detachment](#).

“The shield is down. Commence attack on the Death Star’s main reactor.”

[Cognitive controls](#), including internet controls, spyware, split mobile phone networks, fixed government-approved radio frequencies, and [jamming capabilities](#), are analogous to lethal [anti-access challenges](#). Expanding the concept of anti-access to include cognitive controls moves us towards a more comprehensive understanding of A2/AD beyond the rigid “death star”-like (in reference to the [spherical space station and superweapon](#) used by the evil Galactic Empire in Star Wars) depictions of interlocking [air defense range circles on a map](#). By converging the *conduit-centric* aspects of information warfare—cyber, electromagnetic, and space capabilities—the Army can penetrate the information barriers surrounding the essential target audiences inside North Korea. This will enable outside information to flood into North Korea, illuminate the [regime’s human rights abuses](#) and [corruption](#), and amplify associated grievances.

Inside the Bubble—Connection and Amplification

Once the North Korean population is armed with the relevant information, what’s next? This is where the *content-focused* psychological operations enter to disintegrate existing perceptions and beliefs and [enable resistance partners](#) to exploit the resultant [friction](#). However, two things are necessary to understand: external actors cannot export a revolution, and they cannot create revolutionaries from scratch. Change must come from indigenous actors. What the Army can do is *inspire, connect, and amplify* their efforts.

North Korea’s social control systems prevent critical players from connecting with each other. The second-tier leadership (military and party officials outside of the core regime) can collectively drive change only if they can communicate and coordinate safely. Moreover, brokers organic to North Korea’s population must be able to [facilitate bloc recruitment](#) by connecting disparate groups, both internally and externally, for mass mobilization. Virtual access and sanctuary can be a game-changer, similar to how [Google helped Egyptians circumvent state media control](#) in 2011.



Human and virtual infrastructure are necessary but insufficient for mobilization. Rapid and cross-cutting movement requires [strategic framing to create shared consciousness](#) for collective action. Social movement experts Robert Benford and David Snow [describe how narrative shaping occurs](#) through a frame alignment process. Narrative shaping first requires *bridging* individual conditions to structural issues, like regime incompetence in [handling the COVID pandemic](#) worsening the lives of each citizen beyond their already difficult existence. After bridging to the person, frame *amplification* then creates a sense of ownership, highlighting that the regime is not just incompetent, but organs like Office 39 and party officials [deliberately kept the regime healthy](#) at the expense of its subjects. This is even more effective [when the regime creates iconic martyrs](#), which is inevitable during resistance.

Frame *extension* is the tipping factor that links various narratives within the population to communicate, for example, that it is not just poor farmers suffering, but it is everyone outside of the Kim family. Finally, frame *transformation* [revitalizes historical narratives](#), like how China has used the [Kim family as a pawn](#), a buffer (the “lips”) for China (the “teeth”) against the United States since 1950. It may be useful to narrate how Beijing not only makes the Kim family do its bidding today, but how China also [hid the severity](#) of the coronavirus outbreak that originated in its country and that would devastate the North Korean population and [perpetually-meager economy](#) to keep them dependent. The Army’s array of information advantage capabilities make it uniquely capable of connecting brokers and disseminating and amplifying narratives like these to empower resistance partners.

For skeptics who think an influence campaign will not set conditions for eventual regime transition and denuclearization, these efforts are still valuable as they also could bolster a containment-based approach or [contribute to victory](#) if war breaks out due to regime escalation. Army Special Operations Forces and MDTFs could provide theater commanders enhanced decision support through deep analysis of the North Korean population and regime leadership that would allow for precision messaging against specific points of leverage to prepare the environment prior to and during U.S. engagement across the diplomatic, economic, and military instruments.

Whether regime transition, containment, or escalation to war by the regime, understanding the information environment and building the ability to influence North Korea’s key decision-makers ultimately provides options to impose costs on the regime and shape the trajectory of any given approach.

Out With a Boom or a Chorus of People Power?

The [accelerating pace](#) of North Korea’s nuclear and strategic missile developments requires the United States to pursue a new approach—one that abandons yesterday’s fruitless Groundhog Day efforts and is instead appropriate for today’s information age. Moreover, to truly achieve a position of advantage in the greater competition between democracy and authoritarianism led by China, the United States must exploit all the capabilities and tools in its information instrument of power.

We must acknowledge this is not just an Army or even a joint fight. It is about integrating interorganizational partners and broader U.S. government entities. The Army’s information and influence operations [support broader U.S. public diplomacy](#) efforts conducted by the [Under Secretary](#)



Mememes vs. Missiles? Cognitive Access Denial and the North Korea Problem

of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, the [Principal Information Operations Advisor to the Defense Secretary](#), the State Department's [Global Engagement Center](#), and the [U.S. Agency for Global Media](#) (which operates [Voice of America](#) and [Radio Free Asia](#)).

Furthermore, as the [U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) emphasizes, these efforts must also include our partners and allies. A multi-front campaign to defeat North Korea's cognitive access denial systems, enable resistance partners, and set conditions for regime transition best serves U.S. interests in the end.

While some may question [ARSOF's utility](#) and newer formations like the MDTF for this job, [earlier and smaller applications](#) such as the Joint Effects Group in Syria demonstrated the [outsized return on investment in the information space](#). This flat organization—comprised of only a handful of information professionals, synchronized psychological operations, civil affairs, electronic warfare, and public affairs operations—assisted with mobilization against the Islamic State [through counter-messaging](#) and bolstered alternative local governance efforts such as the [Manbij and Raqqa Civic Councils](#) by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The focus on information as a critical capability enabled the liberation of Islamic State-occupied territory and follow-on governance by U.S. partners—foreshadowing how similar information efforts could support the North Korean people against the Kim family regime.

Converging partner capabilities with psychological operations, cyber, space, and electromagnetic warfare can be the Army's contribution to U.S. information advantage and the [irregular warfare application](#) of [integrated deterrence](#). It is time to use these irregular tools against a threat like North Korea and its fellow regimes in China, Russia, and Iran for strategic effects in support of U.S. national interests.



About the Authors:

Lt. Col. Steve Ferenzi is an Army Strategist and Special Forces officer serving as campaign planner in the U.S. Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT) J5. He previously led the development of U.S. Army Special Operations Command's (USASOC) [Army Special Operations Forces Strategy](#). He holds a Master of International Affairs Degree from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs and is a Non-Resident Fellow with the [Joint Special Operations University](#) (JSOU).

Keith Weber serves in the USASOC G5 Regional Plans Division and was previously responsible for the USASOC Indo-Pacific portfolio. He is a retired U.S. Air Force officer and served as a fire control officer on the AC-130U Spooky Gunship. He holds a Masters of International Relations degree from Troy University.

Jose Madera currently supports the SOCCENT Strategy, Plans, and Policy Directorate. He previously served in the U.S. Special Operations Command Korea (SOCKOR) J3. A retired Civil Affairs officer, he is a graduate of the School of Advanced Military Studies. He holds graduate degrees from Purdue University, Carnegie Mellon University, the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, and the U.S. Army War College.

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy, opinion, or position of the Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, the Irregular Warfare Center, U.S. Special Operations Command, or the authors' employers.