Waging and winning the information war

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IN THE summer of 1988, I was walking with my father in the centre of East Berlin along the perimeter of the Brandenburg Gate that was guarded by the Soviet Red Army soldiers. I was very young back then, but I remember trying to reach my hand across the perimeter fence, shouting with excitement: "Dad... now I am in the West!", without realising what that really meant.

My father looked nervously and said: "You don't want to get shot, do you?"

At that time, there were about 380,000 Soviet troops stationed in East Germany, organised into 20 ground force divisions and one Air army. This was more than twice the size of the former East German Army, the NVA.

Despite the signs of change in the Soviet Union's policies and the promising prospects for improved East-West ties, no one could predict that the Berlin Wall would fall just the following year. Indeed, no one foresaw that the whole of Eastern Europe and subsequently the Soviet Union would disintegrate within a few months.

Twenty-five years later, I found myself walking at the last Cold War frontier in the Joint Security Area in Panmunjon on the border between North and South Korea. I was observing the North Korean military post on the other side, wondering when the wind of change will come to Korea.

"Korea is not Germany," said a Korean friend of mine. Indeed, the security environments in Northeast Asia and Europe differ in many important ways, and thus German experiences with unification obviously cannot simply be transferred and applied to the Korean context.

However, the current interplay of strategic instability and uncertainty on the Korean Peninsula cannot stipulate an indefinite status quo.

Whatever scenario, whether unification by force, by peaceful negotiation, by the collapse of North Korea, or by a non-linear development such as the intervention of foreign powers, it may be characterised by a rapid turn of events.

Therefore, it is important to continue to look at the German case, in order to mitigate the risks of strategic and tactical surprises.

The legitimacy of totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe collapsed as their economies faltered, corrupt bureaucracies crumbled, and more news and information from the outside world permeated in the society and forced political change.

Accordingly, notwithstanding North Korea's efforts to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, the Panmunjon trench on the North Korean side of the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) is not strong enough to counter the power of information from the outside world.

Increasingly, more North Korean refugees share stories of smuggled DVDs with South Korean dramas, USB memory sticks loaded with South Korean news, movies and K-pop music, short-wave radio broadcast with news and weather reports, and high-tech GPS balloons with leaflets detailing the brutality of Kim Jong Un's regime.

While its effects on North Korean society are difficult to ascertain, North Korea has previously threatened to fire across the heavily fortified border to stop such activities.

As with East Germany, where more people smuggled VCR tapes and listened to radio Free Europe, the uncontrolled flow of information is the Achilles' heel of the North Korean regime, particularly in the border areas with China.

This is because of the emergence of black markets and trade, which amplifies greater information flow and provides ordinary North Koreans with a genuine prospect of a better future. In the process, which is slow and gradual, it also undermines the authority of the security apparatus.

Therefore, in order to effectively counter North Korea's nuclear blackmail, South Korea should adopt a defence strategy with a significant emphasis placed on information strategies and "smart power".

Smart power means using a comprehensive approach, engaging instruments of both soft power of diplomacy and hard power of military force to shape conditions for change in North Korea.

The military lines of action should increasingly rely on the use of information – not only to obtain intelligence about North Korea's means, capabilities and strategies, but also to disrupt North Korea's information infrastructure and, most importantly, to enable North Koreans to have access to outside news and information that can alter their internal socio-political and economic narrative.

Ultimately, while North Korea is trying to use its nuclear weapons to create fear in the outside world, what the Kim Jong Un regime fears most is its own inability to adapt and implement meaningful socio-economic reforms.

It fears it will lose its grip on power by losing its control of information. In the long tide of history, however, North Korea's political structure will tumble, just like in the former East Germany. It is a matter of time.

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