



## SELF-DEFENSE IN TAIWAN: NEW FINDINGS FROM SURVEYS

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Professor Dennis Hickey in [PacNet #21](#) summarized major findings from a series of surveys from the Taiwan National Security Survey (TNSS), which prompted a response from Joseph Bosco ([PacNet #21R](#)). We would like to continue the discussion, and to contribute more findings on the issue of self-defense in Taiwan. Our contribution is not a rebuttal to Hickey, but we hope it will shed light on debates about the willingness to support self-defense in Taiwan's media outlets and related discussion forums.

We begin with the major finding in the TNSS raised by Hickey: at least 45% of Taiwanese are not willing to fight against China. This number is based on an open-ended self-defense question item with 23% of respondents answering, “no response” (also pointed out by Hickey). Nevertheless, other public opinion surveys with similar questions produce mixed results.

For example, another survey by the same institute at National Chengchi University shows support for defending against China's invasion [reached almost 70%](#).

Such variations in the response to a similar question from different surveys is quite common since the context of each questionnaire significantly influences the answers (for a thorough review, see [Wang 2017](#)). Even in the US, a survey on the willingness to support US military intervention or operation shows mixed results. It is therefore risky to rely on a single survey source to generalize and infer public sentiment on self-defense.

The willingness of self-defense in Taiwan is a complex issue regarding Taiwan, China, and US. To satisfy our curiosity about support for self-defense among the Taiwanese public, our team designed and implemented an internet survey. We try to include these context factors into consideration through an experimental design. The survey was conducted by a polling center housed inside the Election Study Center at National Chengchi University in Taiwan from July 3-5, 2018. It recruited 1,001 Taiwanese adults aged 20 and older. As pointed out in the academic literature (See Eric Chen-hua Yu in [Public Opinion](#)), this polling center can recruit samples that reach a certain level of national representativeness for respondents aged under 60. Our findings are summarized as follows.

1. “US security promise to Taiwan may help generate morale among Taiwanese citizens and in return, enhance their willingness of self-defense.” ([details](#) at the *National Interest*)
2. “Despite the widening gap in military capabilities across the Taiwan Strait, a significant portion of the public in Taiwan is willing to bear a significant battle cost of war if a conflict is inevitable with China.” ([details](#) at the *Diplomat*)
3. Most respondents that have served in the military (62.4%) believe that conscription training would be helpful in the battlefield, contrary to the widespread belief that the Taiwan public considers military training to be ineffective in preparing for actual combat. Furthermore, when citizens consider training

to be helpful and effective, it will significantly increase their willingness to engage in self-defense. Most important, the public evaluates military experience in Taiwan as a non-partisan issue; it is significantly associated with age but not with partisan or nationalist variables. (article [forthcoming](#) at the *National Interest*)

In addition, we want to highlight an interesting finding in our study: in a hypothetical scenario that the government in Taiwan declares independence, it would not eradicate the public's willingness to defend Taiwan. That is, even under the worst case that citizens in Taiwan could blame their government for initiating the conflict by declaring independence, citizens are still willing to fight against China's invasion. In fact, the statement "Taiwan independence might spark a war" (also warned by Chinese authorities) is misleading. China is pushing for unification and has never given up the notion of unification by force, as President Xi Jinping publicly emphasized this [January](#). From China's viewpoint, any plan that is not pursuing unification will be seen as "independence." If there is a cross-strait military confrontation, the only possible initiator will be China.

Our studies send a reassuring signal to the allies: Taiwan's public is far more dedicated to self-defense than previously thought. Also, according to a [previous survey conducted by Taiwan Foundation for Democracy](#) (executed by National Chengchi University as well) citizens who report higher levels of democratic support [tend to have higher scores on self-defense willingness](#). Many people know the importance of self-defense and value the current democratic system. Recently, issues related to self-defense have been widely discussed in Taiwan, as the Tsai administration has repeated its determination to defend Taiwan on various occasions (e.g., [Premier Su's reply](#) to KMT lawmakers: "if China invades, we will never surrender and we will fight even when we only have a broom.") This trend is also reflected in government policies to strengthen self-defense capability. For example, President Tsai Ing-wen, when participating in [the video conference with the Heritage Foundation](#), reiterated a commitment to modernize military training programs. Also, the recent request to purchase F-16V fighters and M1

Abrams tanks, and the Indigenous Defense Submarine project all reflect a determination to enhance defense capabilities and reinforce the US commitment to Taiwan.

However, the opposition parties in Taiwan seem to be against upgrading defense capabilities because they do not want to "provoke" China. At the same time, waves of fake news have been attacking military procurement projects (see clarifications by [Ministry of Defense, ROC](#)), which is the latest example of China's "public opinion warfare" and "psychological warfare." The PLA regularly conducts drills with aircraft fighters and warships around Taiwan (also [provoking Japan](#)), signaling its military strength and coercive diplomacy. As illustrated by many experts who have long watched cross-strait issues (for example, [Wendell Minnick](#) and [Josh Rogin](#) both point out the huge pressures from China's dominance), this is an important issue that policymakers need to understand. Grasping how the public in Taiwan thinks about self-defense is a critical first step.

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