



**TO CHANGE TAIWAN'S
CONSCRIPTION SYSTEM, CHANGE
THE CULTURE**

BY CLAIRE TIUNN

Claire Tiunn (Chang) (claire@pacforum.org) is a research intern at Pacific Forum and a politics and Russian and Eastern European studies double major at Pomona College.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February, Taiwanese polls [indicated](#) that, should the People's Republic of China attack Taiwan, 74% of Taiwanese citizens were willing to defend the island. However, the question is not if they will fight, but how prepared they are.

In Taiwan, all men are conscripted into the military, but the period of service has been shortened in recent decades, from the original two years to one year (as of 2008) and now—since 2018—to just four months.

Yet, with the Ukraine invasion and the Chinese military drills following Nancy Pelosi's August visit to Taiwan, the reality of war is inching closer. Taiwanese Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng [said](#) in late March that Taiwan is considering extending the compulsory military service.

If Taiwan is truly committed to defending itself against the People's Liberation Army, discussions should not *only* consider duration, but must also reform the activities associated with conscription.

A shared pessimism, a fractured relationship

To learn more, I spoke to young Taiwanese men on their experiences in the military and the glaring problems in Taiwan's defense. The interviewees included men who served the four months of military service, but also those who completed the 12-day replacement service—an alternative option for men who have physical or mental health issues, dependent families, and low-income households. Replacement soldier service is fairly common: in 2021, [17% of men](#)

[from Kaohsiung City](#) enlisted in the replacement service instead of the standing military reserve service.

Within this cohort, there is a shared sense of pessimism. “If we had to be on the frontlines, we definitely did not have enough preparation. People just didn't take it seriously,” one said—a sentiment that all the men seemed to share about their compatriots.

Where did this “unseriousness” toward conscription arise and how does Taiwanese society reinforce it? There are some fixable but neglected problems reflected by my interviewees: broken practice equipment, 50-year-old guns, and prolonged periods of sitting around, doing nothing. Society as a whole also does not prioritize military readiness. One of the men reflected: “The way people talk about the military just doesn't feel that serious. People liken it to summer camp, or something to do between summers in college. If you took it seriously, it's almost funny.”

For young Taiwanese men in the military, there is a jarring cognitive dissonance between their political and military stance. The men in the military “are vocally against Beijing, Xi Jinping, and the People's Liberation Army.” In 2020, the Pew Research Center [observed](#) that Taiwanese between ages 18-29 are less likely to support closer economic or political ties with China when compared to their older counterparts. However, anti-PRC sentiment does not motivate these men, and wider society, to make sacrifices to defend their republic, nor does it translate into increased alertness toward PRC threats or investment into defenses.

“[China's invasion] is never a topic of discussion [in the military],” one interviewee said. Another lamented, “Of course, everyone knows that the threat from China has always existed, but they think that it's only in the news. They don't know that it's coming.”

For one thing, the bias toward optimism clouds understanding of war. Taiwan clings to the hope that the PRC will not invade, or that even if it does, the United States would break its strategic ambiguity and come to Taiwan's rescue. Based on a [survey](#) from Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation, 51% of respondents disagreed with the statement “do you think China will invade Taiwan at any time?” while 39% of respondents agreed.

Secondly, we see the stigma against occupational soldiers in the popular idiom “a good man does not

become a soldier, and a good piece of metal does not hit a nail.” This stigma is a byproduct of the third reason: the fractured relationship between the military and the Taiwanese public.

This dates all the way back to 1949, when the Kuomintang (KMT) fled to Taiwan from the Chinese mainland and began its military occupation as the de facto government of Taiwan. The subsequent 228 Incident and the martial law period, dubbed the White Terror, traumatized Taiwanese people as the KMT military imprisoned, tortured, and executed local elites, intelligentsia, and civilians.

Modern-day Taiwan looks very different from the repressive, authoritarian regime that ruled the archipelago until a few decades ago. Taiwan’s road to democracy and investment in transitional justice has reformed many once-authoritarian institutions, making Taiwan a leading democracy in Asia. However, political repression at the hands of the military still taints Taiwanese society’s view of the military generations later.

A military/civilian solution

The invasion of Ukraine shocked Taiwan, and the world. Analysts, policymakers, and netizens often ask, “Is Taiwan next?” A more productive question would be: What can we do to make Taiwan prohibitively costly to invade?

Healing the fractured relationship between the military and the civilians is a harder task than any one policy can tackle. Taiwanese people should recognize and respect the military. More importantly, the military should earn its respect within Taiwanese society. There are two tangible ways the military and civilians can work together to achieve a defensive Taiwanese military for the Taiwanese people.

Not only should citizen soldiers have a longer and more intense conscription service, Taiwanese culture

should shift to recognize the threat of invasion. Critics should not interpret efforts to change the duration and quality of Taiwan’s military as an attempt to transform the liberal democratic country into a military regime. Instead, it is a way to signal to Beijing that the risks of invading Taiwan will outweigh the gains. Taiwanese men should walk away from their service feeling more confident in their country’s defense system after going through the rigorous boot camp.

Even more importantly, Taiwanese civilians should feel like their military will protect them. Besides improving conscription services, the Taiwanese military should also consider establishing short-term, low-commitment courses for civilians. A [growing number](#) of private companies have already taken the initiative in teaching civilians the basics of surviving war and weapon use. The military can use this opportunity to build a stronger bond with the public and also lead and supervise disseminated information for a territorial defense force, much like Ukraine’s “[weekend warriors](#)” prior to the 2022 invasion.

Taiwan’s future is not set. However, China’s military capacities are growing, making Taiwan’s need for deterrence ever-pressing and imperative. Taiwan must develop and fortify its defense units, starting from civilians and conscription soldiers. This means more than buying new weapons, building asymmetric capabilities, or lengthening the period of conscription. Taiwan needs a whole-of-society approach to preparedness, and must internalize Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s speech a day before Russia’s invasion: “When you attack us, you will see our faces, not our backs.”

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