



## CONSCRIPTION IN KOREA AND TAIWAN: THE DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES

BY KENDRICK FARM

*Kendrick Farm (kendrick@pacforum.org) is Resident James A. Kelly Korea Fellow at Pacific Forum. A leader in Indo-Pacific business, security, and community to promote US, allied, and local shared interests in policies, he is involved with a US-South Korean Joint Venture with an emphasis on Artificial Intelligence (AI). He also has experience in drafting legislation and resolutions. He also graduated from Purdue University (online) with a Master of Science Degree in Psychology with a concentration in Applied Behavior Analysis.*

Mandatory military conscription systems differ between the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Republic of China (Taiwan), raising questions about their different standards of military training. Furthermore, they raise deeper questions about whole-of-society acceptance of and approach to defense needs, which may prove crucial in both countries' long-term defenses. As we will see, failure to understand the significance of length of service can have serious consequences.

For the ROK the largest threat comes from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), whose forces lie approximately 30 miles from Seoul, the ROK's largest city and capital. Taiwan's only significant threat is the People's Republic of China (PRC), 100 miles off the coastline of Taiwan, and the two sides are separated by a strait that is one of the most heavily trafficked areas for maritime commerce.

Societal views are reflected in the implementation and intent of conscription. In South Korea, all seven members of the globally popular music group BTS have signed on to complete their required military

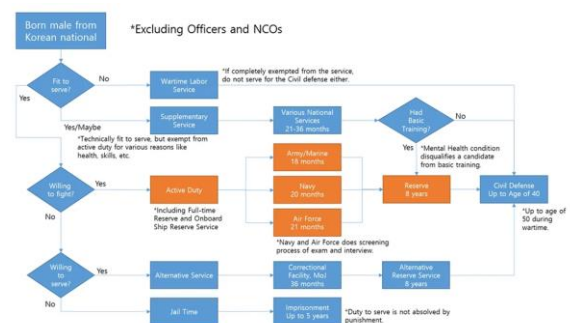
service. As of 2024 [one member](#) has completed their mandatory service period of two years, as other band members await their initial military training date.

In contrast, in Taiwan in December 2022, then-President Tsai Ing-wen [announced](#) a politically controversial policy that, beginning in 2024, mandatory military service would be extended from the insufficient four-month requirement to one year of training for eligible males born on or after Jan. 1, 2005. Her decision was sensitive even though it [addressed a problem](#) of insufficient personnel and readiness

### Requiring different service

Pursuant to national law in South Korea, compulsory military service is [required](#) of all males starting at age 18. This has been policy for decades and has not changed dramatically in that timeframe. If a person is deemed ineligible for military service, they are assigned to other services such as the National Police or other public service institutions.

All conscripts serve in the active component for no less than two years. Conscripts deemed fit for service and volunteers are given the same training in one of Korea's National Training Centers. This period for this entry training is six weeks. Once completed, all new members of the Korean Armed Forces move on to their respective branches for additional training (see flow chart).




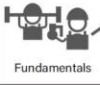



Credit:

[https://www.reddit.com/r/Military/comments/1ckm5o/conscription\\_of\\_south\\_korea/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Military/comments/1ckm5o/conscription_of_south_korea/)

Taiwan's version of conscription differs [in many respects](#) from that of South Korea.

For example, according to the 2023 National Defense Report, planned basic military training (BMT) [consists](#) of eight weeks. Similar to Korea, Taiwan has provisions for males not considered viable for service but who can still perform some form of national service (see the following chart from the National Defense Report 2023).

[ Planned BMT and Unit Training Curriculum of 2024 for Conscripts ]

BMT Courses				
The 1 <sup>st</sup> Week	The 2 <sup>nd</sup> Week	From the 3 <sup>rd</sup> to 4 <sup>th</sup> Weeks	From the 5 <sup>th</sup> to 7 <sup>th</sup> Weeks	The 8 <sup>th</sup> Week
 Orientation	 Fundamentals	 Individual Skills	 Composite Training	 Final Evaluation, Reassignment after Complete of Training
Creating personal data Legal education Military courtesy Equipment maintenance etc...	Basic physical fitness, Close-in combat skills Shooting rehearsals Grenade throwing etc...	Live-shooting Battlefield orientation Combat casualty care 500m obstacle run etc...	Anti-gas training under realistic conditions NBC training Combat drills 5-10 km march etc...	Stress inoculation training Field tactical march Realistic drills Reassignment after Complete of Training by lot-drawing etc...

Note: ■ Common defense education will be imparted in the evening class hours and its contents includes patriotic education, military ethics, understanding of cognitive warfare, internal security education, military legal education and discipline, and health education, etc  
■ Rifle shooting includes multiple positions.

*Credit: Republic of China National Defense Report 2023*

### Compare and contrast: Implications for military training

South Korea has a long-standing law that is steeped in societal acceptance toward military service as a typical process most males must undertake.

As mentioned, then-President Tsai reinstating the time of service to one year, was [not popular](#) politically. However, there is a profound difference in one (1) year of service in the Taiwan compared to two (2) years of service. At face value, South Korea seems to have less time with initial military training, but their conscripts receive longer training over 18-21 month. Additional training is given to the conscripts from the military components that they are entering such as the army/marines, navy, or air force.

However, Taiwan's previous political decisions to reduce conscription periods to four months and then raising it back to one year reflected the unpopularity of conscription. Nonetheless, there are two explanations for this phenomenon: lack of support for military service or lack of [useful military training](#) that would increase readiness and economic skills.

In contrast, two years of service as required in the South Korea profoundly affects competency and effectiveness. Typically, the longer military personnel are in their military specialty, the more proficient and competent they become. There is the added benefit that those personnel would be able to mentor incoming conscripts within their respective units. In theory, those new conscripts benefitting from mentors would be trained up faster.

Taiwan has systemic recruiting and retention challenges. Thus, well-trained troops who make the military into their career field are in short supply. This problem in turn reduces the proficiency and capacity of Taiwanese armed forces in all areas, encompassing a [long-term challenge](#). Consequently, a one-year "turnover" creates a logistical issue as well.

### Conclusion and recommendations: Implications for societal defense

In summation, like South Korea, Taiwan is in a precarious position and is moving in the right direction by reinstating the one-year conscription requirement, because such required national military training is not only important for personnel recruitment and [military readiness](#) but also for the whole-of-society's deterrence and defense. Therefore, much more is needed in Taiwan. There needs to be a deep introspective look at a national and societal level and the viewpoint of national defense.

South Koreans, subject to required military conscription, might be individually unhappy with this national requirement. However, South Korea's societal acceptance of national defense has meant that people who try to skirt the duty or leave Taiwan to circumvent conscription law are seen as cowardly, not doing their part for the greater society, and treated as social pariahs. Examples are South Korean celebrities who [left the country](#) to escape mandatory service and drew the fan base's negative response.

In contrast, Taiwan's societal views previously indicated the unwillingness to return to one-year conscription and doubts about increased defense spending. This mindset is counter-productive to the national propensity to fight their existential threat.

Some [polls](#) indicate that there is a segment of Taiwan's population who will leave the country, choose to surrender, or simply hide. However, [other polls](#) suggest that as much as 70% of Taiwanese people would fight to defend their country.

However, in the case of Taiwan, there may be confounding variables to the issue of social reluctance toward military service. The island state's ruling party, the Kuomintang, instituted martial law from the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949 until 1987, during which time the military's role took on the role of law enforcement over a civilian population. The military implemented measures of control that were considered [violent and suppressive](#) by the general public. This historical trauma is still remembered by segments of the Taiwanese population today, which may be an additional reason that Taiwan is resistant to military service.

For Taiwan, South Korea is an appropriate example of another Asian society that also faces an existential threat—as well as its own period of [military rule](#). Yet, as mentioned previously, Korea generally has deep and wide societal acceptance of mandatory military service. Someone skirting the responsibility of national military service is seen as a coward, because their individual action and decision diminish their country's overall defense.

Taiwan must institute a whole-of-society approach by the media, educational institutions (at all levels), and discussions around the family table about how conscription should not be seen as a burden but an honorable duty and part of life as a ROC citizen. Defense is not only the military's duty but that of the whole society. Part of educating all of society as to the importance of conscription is making them aware of the qualitative difference between four months and one year in military training—as well as the difference between one year and two.

In addition, bilateral and multilateral military dialogues involving Taiwan about required military training should be part of efforts to deter coercion and conflict as well as to shore up Taiwan's [resilience and legitimacy](#).

Taiwan should extend military conscription to longer than one year, especially since [it lacks](#) a territorial defense force like that of Ukraine. After the Taiwan's first group of reinstated one-year conscripts completed their basic military training, a survey in 2024 found [important public support](#) for this extended compulsory military service.

Urgency is needed. Taiwan will face an [existential crisis](#) in less than 10 years, possibly in the second half of the 2020s or the first half of the 2030s.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*