

Taiwan's All-Volunteer Force and Military Transformation

BY DEE WU

Questions regarding the Taiwanese all-volunteer force (AVF) policy have been raised both in Taiwan (Republic of China, ROC) and the United States. During a symposium held by the Global Taiwan Institute, U.S. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs David Helvey recommended that Taiwan should prioritize building a “capable, effective force,” instead of the “elite force” he recommended a year ago, seeming to suggest a shift in the United States’ view of Taiwan’s AVF policy.¹ The change in tone from the U.S. joins an increasing chorus of negative voices (especially from pan-green media and political parties) toward the Taiwanese government’s implementation of an all-volunteer force.^{2,3}

However, most arguments against the AVF only focus on the temporary drawbacks of policy implementation without viewing it under Taiwan’s long-term defense strategy. The author argues that the different assertions regarding the feasibility of Taiwan’s AVF policy stems from a lack of understanding of Taiwan’s defense strategy. While Taiwan calls for better projection capabilities to attack, disrupt, and even defeat the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) far outside of the island, the United States appears to only want Taiwan to focus on the battle near the beaches. This difference results in the contradicting views on Taiwan’s AVF policy, which is a “must” in the former warfighting scenario, as it requires a more capable military. In this sense, an elite AVF in Taiwan should be in line with U.S. interests given Taiwan would be less dependent on the United

States. In general, the author argues that pursuing an AVF from a defense strategy perspective is a painful but necessary mission, needed to transform the Taiwanese military into a more capable combat force.

The two most common arguments against the AVF policy are the current shortage of personnel, and the perceived lack of public interest and commitment toward national defense in Taiwan. According to the latest report from Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense (MND), the ROC military is still 2,000 personnel away from meeting its “basic combat power” goal, after allowing for 11,000 more men to be conscripted in 2018.^{4,5} Furthermore, the number of enrolled junior officers is also insufficient, most likely as a result of the decreasing birth rate and decreased enrollment at the military academies.⁶ These challenges have reinforced the perception that both the Taiwanese government and the Taiwanese people lack the commitment to defend their own country. Analysts that oppose AVF often support the need for national conscription with examples from South Korea and Sweden, both of whom face serious military threats from their adversaries.⁷

[Taiwan's] Force structure should be coherent with [its] defense strategy and warfighting scenarios.

Yet, these arguments often lack a comprehensive view of Taiwan’s defense strategy. A reasonable force structure should be coherent, within the constraints of a nation’s overall defense strategy, and

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matched to warfighting scenarios. Based on Taiwan’s annual “Han Kuang” national defense exercise this year, the MND considers the People’s Liberation Army’s military doctrines against Taiwan to include the following: joint strikes, joint blockades, and joint landing operations. Each phase would involve and require coordination among PLA services.

During an invasion, joint strikes would involve the PLA’s Rocket Force (PLARF) and Air Force (PLAAF), who would seek to eliminate Taiwan’s air-defense systems, command and control (C2) nodes, and jet fighters. Joint blockades would be mainly conducted by the PLA Navy (PLAN) and PLAAF. Landing operations would employ the PLA’s Army amphibious and aviation units, PLAN Marines, and PLAAF paratrooper units.⁸ To counter Chinese threats, the Tsai Administration’s objectives are to “deter the enemy from the Strait, attack the enemy on the sea, damage the enemy in the littoral zones, and defeat the enemy on the coast.”⁹ Accordingly, Taiwan’s MND has developed joint air defense, joint interception, and joint territorial defense as key components of its military doctrines.¹⁰

In response to the PLA’s projection into the Western Pacific, Taiwan needs to emphasize the need for its Navy and Air Force to operate in more distant areas.

To effectively execute its military strategy, Taiwan needs an elite AVF. In comparison to former President Ma Ying-jeou’s military strategy that prioritized “defense,” the current Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government puts more emphasis on “deterrence” and envisions a war with the PLA that begins far away from the main island’s beaches. In order to achieve that, Taiwan first needs to lay more emphasis on its Navy and Air Force. The underlying

rationale is that these two services are more capable of engaging enemy forces in the open sea, and of projecting outward to strike potential PLA areas of responsibility (AORs or areas of operation) north, south, and east of Taiwan. The latter has become increasingly important as the PLAN and PLAAF are now projecting their forces well into the Western Pacific, requiring the Taiwanese military to expedite its own ability to operate in these more distant areas.



(PLAAF in the Western Pacific. Source: Taiwan’s Defense Ministry)

If the MND is to prioritize the Navy and Air Force, one cannot overlook the importance of AVF policy for these two services. Generally, the Navy and Air Force require higher professionalism and more investments in training. Take the Navy as an example. In Taiwan, navy personnel must complete bootcamp, service training, general training, and specialty training to serve on the ships. Indeed, it is difficult for one-year conscripts to meet such requirements. Conscripts rarely have the time-in-uniform needed to learn teamwork and to participate in military exercises.

In contrast, professional forces have the service time needed to become capable of operating command and control (C2) systems, or to become experts in repair and

logistics, which requires expertise in handling both hardware and software. As Taiwan is looking to build its own Aegis ships, the need for an elite force to operate such advanced technology will only grow stronger. Using the case of Aegis ships as an example, for the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF), core crews and officers are generally required to receive education and training in the U.S. for about one year. After an Aegis ship is commissioned, it has to pass the Combat System Ship Qualification Trial (CSSQT). That requires another six months to test all the weapons and related systems. Meanwhile, JMSDF officers and crews have to prove that they are qualified to operate the Aegis Weapon System (AWS), including C2.¹¹ If Taiwan is going to successfully build its own Aegis ships, it will need an elite force to invest the needed time to operate these ships.

An AVF will be indispensable because the current Tsai administration envisions a military capable of conducting complicated joint operations. All services will be required to operate C2 systems adeptly to produce “jointness.” This is critical in light of China's military buildup. In addition to the PLA's past attention to realize effective anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, it has been actively making improvements to its amphibious landing forces against Taiwan. First, in 2007, the PLA started to build or procure larger amphibious landing platforms, such as the Type 071 Landing Platform Dock (LPD), and Zubr-class air-cushioned landing crafts.¹²¹³ These platforms may allow enemy landing forces to disembark and attack over the horizon. They also increase the PLA's sealift capacity.

Second, the PLA is reportedly devoting more resources to the PLAN Marines, which before 2010 only had 10,000-12,000

troops. While unconfirmed, it is reported that the 77th Brigade of the 80th Group Army was transferred to the PLAN Marines, and two other Army divisions might undergo a similar process in the future.¹⁴ Third, the PLAAF has reorganized the 15th Airborne Corps (空降兵第15軍) into the “corps of PLA airborne troops” (空降兵軍), and replaced former division-level units with brigades as the second tier of the commanding system. As the new Airborne Corps are composed of several brigades, it is very likely that the Eastern Theatre Command will also receive paratrooper units to support its buildup against Taiwan.¹⁵ Overall, the PLA is enhancing its operational capabilities for a Taiwan scenario by procuring better platforms and streamlining its force structure.

PLA reforms demand that Taiwanese ground forces also make needed reforms and increase professionalism. During the 2017 “Han Kuang” exercise, there was an emphasis placed on the use of the AH-64 Apache, and AH-1W SuperCobra helicopter gunships, in response to an invasion force.¹⁶ The Army's aviation platforms are more capable of “damaging the enemy in the littoral zone” than other army units, given their speed, flexibility, and projection capabilities. The service of these advanced platforms signify the increasing professionalism of the ROC Army.

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The reduction of personnel required by the AVF policy will force the ROC Army to transform and overcome organizational inertia. In years past, the Taiwanese Army laid emphasis on owning more than a thousand battle tanks and artillery pieces. When analyzing the “Han Kuang” exercise,

it appears that the concept of operations (CONOPs) for these two platforms during anti-landing operations is lining up along the coast to concentrate fires, which is ineffective and costly in terms of human resources. This is particularly true as Chinese invasion forces are likely to cross the Taiwan Strait only after the PLA seizes air superiority. In this event, the enemy would seriously threaten Taiwanese tanks and artilleries on the coast. One should consider whether the shortage of platoon tank officers in Taiwan is actually a negative factor when compared to the general military balance in the Strait.¹⁷



(ROC Army's Anti-Landing Forces. Source: United Daily News)

Instead of putting massive numbers of tanks and artillery guns along the coast, it would be better if the ROC Army adopted more effective CONOPs, along with the use of more human-capital efficient platforms. For instance, the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) may partly resolve the army's current intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) and precision-strike problems,^{18,19} while also making use of manpower more efficiently. Only through the application of these reforms can the Taiwanese ground forces successfully carry out anti-landing operations and territorial defense without requiring excessive personnel. Most importantly, it would require an AVF to

professionally operate these platforms and tasks.

The major drawback of implementing the AVF policy is the degrading capabilities of conscripts. Currently, Taiwanese males born after 1994 are required to fulfill four-months of military training. In times of war, they will be assigned to the reserve forces, and will be expected to carry out local defense missions. Despite their limited role, it should be noted that one great advantage Taiwan has in the event of an invasion by China is the mass number of reserve forces (approximately 2.5 million), compared to the latter's limited landing forces.²⁰ If Taiwan wants to take advantage of this, it should improve training for these conscripts during both the bootcamp and reserve forces call-up. It is well known that training in these two stages is inadequate. For example, most conscripts only learn to shoot in prone position during their bootcamp training.

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The Taiwanese military should make the most out of the little time available to train their conscripts to be qualified foot soldiers, instead of spending time on rather ineffective tasks such as memorizing and practicing the outdated "foot soldier battle training" manual (單兵戰鬥教練).

Moreover, the reserve forces only have approximately 20 days of training in 8 years.²¹ This is not the combat capability Taiwanese conscripts should have in the future. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has taken note of the deficiency in Taiwan's reserve forces, and has been working with Taiwan's military to address the challenges, and help bolster its reserve forces. According to a RAND report, Taiwan could, for example, mobilize more

reserve units in its annual “Han Kuang” exercise to improve their readiness.²²

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Despite these challenges, the implementation of the AVF policy represents a pivotal moment and is essential for the future of Taiwan’s defense. Although personnel shortages are currently an issue, this is an opportunity for the Taiwanese military to correct its organizational inertia, and make use of its forces more efficiently. This is in line with the Tsai administration’s strategy, given that it requires more emphasis on the Navy and Air Force services in which fewer personnel are needed. On the whole, comparing Taiwan to South Korea and Sweden is a mistake, as these countries face more threats from the heavy ground forces of their adversaries (North Korea and Russia).²³ In contrast, the PLA could not even consider landing its troops on Taiwan unless their “joint strikes” and “joint blockades” operations had already proven successful. Taiwan needs to implement its AVF policy in order to form a more capable joint Navy and Air Force, that is ready to meet the PLA in the event of an all-out invasion. However, this argument does not exclude calls for action toward enhanced ROC Army professionalization, as well. As the Army procures more technologically advanced platforms, it will need professional all-volunteer troops to operate them. Properly trained and equipped, the four-year volunteer forces of the ROC Army will have the edge over the two-year conscripts from the PLA Army.

There are several measures Taiwan’s MND can adopt to enhance its AVF policy:

- **Improve Training.** Better training improves military capabilities, enhances morale, and elevates the status of the military among Taiwanese society. This is the first and basic step to show both the Taiwanese society and the PLA that Taiwan can fight. Through this means, Taiwanese youths will be more attracted to joining the military because of the honor and professionalism it represents. In this sense, MND should reconsider its decision in 2016 to lower the physical training standards.²⁴
- **Enhance Recruitment.** Currently, recruiters often only advertize the military’s high salary in order to entice Taiwanese youths to join the military. This has led to certain numbers of psychologically unprepared youths enrolled in Taiwan’s military, as they often lack the sense of honor and responsibility during their service. Instead, the ROC military should change its materialistic recruitment discourse by highlighting the honor, responsibility, and professionalism of serving as a Taiwanese soldier.
- **Subsidize Military Programs in Civilian Universities.** Taiwanese civilian universities lack programs on military studies. This has resulted in the public’s ignorance of service in the military as a profession, and the shortage of civilian experts in this field. If the Taiwanese government were willing to subsidize military programs in civilian universities, there would be

more civilians from all fields conducting security studies, and researching a broad field of study, ranging from war strategy and PLA studies, to military science. This would benefit Taiwan's military. It would allow for more civilians to be qualified to work at MND on policy issues, while allowing more uniformed officers to serve in the field where they are best suited. Meanwhile, having more civilians in billets currently occupied by uniformed officers may also relieve the shortage of personnel.

The U.S. could also play a role in helping Taiwan implement its AVF policy:

- **Respect and Support for Taiwan's policy.** Taiwan is a democracy. It forms its policy based on the will of its people. In other words, it is important for the United States to respect the Taiwanese people's decision to have an all-volunteer force. In addition, the U.S. should understand that Taiwan is in fact pursuing a stronger and self-reliant military, and the implementation of AVF is an integral part of the strategy. Lastly, the AVF policy is a clear force planning directive that follows the ROC's strategy and war-fighting scenarios.
- **Sales of "Deterrence" Weapons.** The United States should understand that selling "asymmetrical" and passive defensive weapons to Taiwan is misguided. If the ROC military can only engage with the PLA near

coastal areas, this could make an attack more likely, ultimately endangering regional peace. In a joint blockade scenario, if the Taiwanese Navy is incapable of deploying attack submarines, it will cede its sea lines of communication (SLOCs) to the PLA, and will create burdens for the United States. Conducting arms sales with more "deterrence" components, including the AWS, and submarine combat systems, will not only bolster Taiwan's defense capabilities but will also drive the need for elite forces (for combat, maintenance, and logistics purposes).

- **Increase in Joint Training.** The United States can increase the level of military cooperation with Taiwan. With more exchanges between the two sides, the Taiwanese military would be driven to professionalize its military in order to match U.S. standards. One of the areas in which the ROC Army can learn from the U.S. is urban warfare. Thus far, there are few units in Taiwan that specialize in this mission.²⁵

As shown above, one should assess Taiwan's AVF policy through the lense of its unique strategy and warfighting scenarios. Even though there are drawbacks to this policy, they can be corrected with appropriate measures. These problems are temporary and cannot override the fact that AVF makes sense for Taiwan's defense, given the great threat it faces. Transforming the Taiwanese military is required, and building an elite AVF is an essential part of this process.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Republic of China's (ROC) Ministry of National Defense or the Taiwan Government.

Notes

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- ¹⁹ The author interviewed a ROC Army officer this November, when he pointed out that the ROC Army lacked its own radar units. Unfortunately, Taiwan’s MND decided to transfer the entire Army Target Reconnaissance Group, which was equipped with Chung Shyang II UAVs, to the Navy.
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