



THE BOILING MOAT

URGENT STEPS TO DEFEND TAIWAN

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CHAPTER 4

A New Military Culture for Taiwan

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Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable; procures success to the weak, and esteem to all.

—GEORGE WASHINGTON

Although deterrence failed against Moscow and Hamas, Taipei and Washington still have time—though perhaps not much—to dissuade Beijing from “rolling the iron dice.” This chapter addresses two important vulnerabilities in Taiwan’s military culture that Taipei should address urgently: its lack of preparation for a *protracted* war and lack of readiness to *mobilize quickly*. (In different ways, this is also true of Taiwan’s partners, the United States, Japan, and Australia, which will be discussed in subsequent chapters.)

Two years of full-scale war in Ukraine—and the eight years of low-intensity conflict that preceded it—underscore the potential for protraction. A fight for Taiwan may not be short. It could drag on for months or even years if it spills over to the wider region. Nor will Taiwan benefit from two factors that have helped keep Ukraine in the fight: strategic depth and a land border with a US ally across which Washington can surge weapons and material.

Meanwhile, Hamas’s audacious assault on October 7, 2023, reminds us that Taiwan should maintain *the ability to mobilize rapidly*.

That Hamas's planning went undetected and its extensive preparations, even when visible, weren't well understood at the time proves that determined adversaries can still achieve the element of surprise, even in today's information-rich environment.

Deterring Beijing will ultimately require convincing Xi Jinping that he cannot achieve his military objectives with respect to Taiwan.¹ To this end, the more Xi thinks that Taiwan can and will resist an invasion for as long as it takes, the less likely that he will order an attack. The wars in Israel and Ukraine show us why Taiwan therefore needs a military—and a society—that is, as US officers like to say, “ready to fight tonight” and for as many days and nights as it takes thereafter.

Unfortunately, Taiwan's military is neither built nor acculturated for quick mobilization or prolonged struggle. Taiwanese military planners assume that they will be able to detect Beijing's invasion preparations weeks, if not months, in advance, providing time to arm and deploy units, scramble ships and jets, recall and train reservists, and pre-stage munitions.² Yet the reality is that if Beijing attacks, it seems highly unlikely that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) will allow Taiwan to mobilize unimpeded. At a minimum, Taiwan will have to deal with subterfuge, diversion, and disinformation. Realistically, Taiwan may have to mobilize its forces while under sustained cyber and missile attack. It is possible that Beijing will have infiltrated enough sleeper cells into Taiwan to knock out key symbols of national power, command-and-control nodes, and mobilization infrastructure. Thus, any realistic plan for mobilization should be designed (and rehearsed) for a worst-case scenario, not one that depends on Washington and Taipei accurately interpreting Xi's intentions ninety days in advance.

Taiwanese doctrine, training, equipment, and organization are all based on the notion that a cross-strait war will be short and decisive. Indeed, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) downplays the risk of all-out war altogether, insisting that its posture, capabilities, and concepts should be optimized to counter China's “gray-zone” activities (discussed in chapter 6) instead of its most dangerous course of action: a large-scale invasion.³

To the degree that senior Taiwanese military officers and political officials contemplate full-scale war at all, such planning is based on the hope that a Chinese invasion fleet can be intercepted and destroyed before reaching Taiwan's shores. And while sinking China's fleet is indeed Taipei and Washington's best strategy (see chapters 5 and 7), we argue that training and equipping Taiwan's ground forces—and citizens—to resist Chinese incursions (such as fifth-column saboteurs, PLA paratroopers, and limited breakthroughs by Chinese amphibious assault forces) will put deterrence on an even stronger footing.

This chapter offers a set of practical and achievable steps to address these critical vulnerabilities. We call for cultivating a collective will to fight and acquiring the material, organizational, and doctrinal wherewithal to resist a Chinese military onslaught for as long as it takes. In essence, we advocate for using *social* depth to offset Taiwan's lack of geographic depth.

The chapter starts by reviewing Taiwan's long-standing approach to organizing and training its active, conscript, reserve, and civil defense forces, as well as the Tsai administration's reforms. It will discuss some lessons learned about rapid mobilization from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), which has more experience quickly recalling and fielding a highly capable reserve force in wartime than any other military in the world. It concludes by addressing the impediments to defense reform and offering both an overarching blueprint for change and a set of practical policy recommendations for getting from here to there.

The Military Taiwan Has

Taiwan's military looks imposing, at least on paper. It consists of an all-volunteer, full-time (active) force augmented by short-service conscripts and a reserve force divided into an army, navy, air force, and marine corps.⁴ Although the active force has an authorized end strength of 175,000 uniformed personnel, the MND has consistently struggled to reach this goal.⁵ As of 2023, the active force had 169,000 service members, approximately 160,000 of whom were full-time volunteers

and the remainder of whom were four-month conscripts.⁶ The reserve force can, at least in theory, recall up to two million former troops.⁷

Although national service is mandated under Taiwan's constitution, most conscripts currently serve for just four months. Over the past two decades and across successive Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and Kuomintang (KMT) administrations, the length of mandatory military service was reduced from over two years to its current length.⁸ This requirement, as we discuss at length below, is once again shifting. Starting in January 2024, Taiwanese men born after January 1, 2005, can be called to serve for one year. The transition to yearlong conscription for a majority of young men should be complete by 2027.⁹ It is also worth noting that as early as 2000, the government began to allow those potential conscripts to apply for substitute service by performing civilian tasks in lieu of military service.

The Taiwanese military likewise seems to boast a formidable arsenal of weaponry.¹⁰ The army has 650 main battle tanks (to which it will soon add 108 modern US M1A2 Abrams), nearly 200 infantry fighting vehicles, 1,500 armored personnel carriers, nearly 100 attack helicopters, and at least 2,000 artillery pieces. The navy has 4 destroyers, 22 frigates, 44 patrol boats, 2 landing ships (with at least 3 new ones under contract), 44 landing craft, and 4 submarines (with 8 indigenously produced diesel submarines on the way). And the air force has nearly 500 combat aircraft. Taiwan's armed forces are also bristling with an ever-growing array of antiair, antiship, and long-range strike missiles.

In light of the foregoing, why should Washington worry about Taiwan's ability to defend itself against invasion? After all, China must project power across the Taiwan Strait to seize, subdue, and occupy Taiwan. Amphibious operations are extraordinarily complex to plan and execute under the best of circumstances, and the PLA might lack the amphibious shipping and combat experience to launch one.¹¹ Moreover, conquering Taiwan—whose main island is naturally defensible—would require the largest and most complex amphibious assault in history.¹²

It is nevertheless our considered view that if Beijing were to launch an all-out invasion tomorrow, Taiwan's military would struggle to hold out long enough for the United States and its allies to intervene with

TAIWAN STRAIT MILITARY BALANCE, GROUND FORCES			
	CHINA		TAIWAN
	Total	Tawain Strait Area*	Total
Total Ground Force Personnel	1,050,000	420,000	89,000
Group Armies/Army Corps	13	5	3
Combined Arms Brigades	82	31 (6 Amphibious)	7
Artillery Brigades	15	5	3
Army Aviation Brigades	13	4	2
Air Assault Brigades	3	1	0
Airborne Brigades	7	7	0
Marine Brigades	8	5	2
Tanks	4,200	1,100	900
Artillery Pieces**	7,600	2,300	1,300
*For the purposes of this document, the "Taiwan Strait Area" includes the PLA's Eastern and Southern Theaters.			
**For the purposes of this document, "Artillery Pieces" refers to systems 100mm and larger, are either towed or self-propelled, and includes Multiple Rocket Launchers (MRLs).			

This chart compares the ground force personnel of China and Taiwan. *Office of the Secretary of Defense, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023: Annual Report to Congress, US Department of Defense, October 19, 2023, 185.*

decisive force. In particular, Taiwanese doctrine, training, equipment, stockpiles, and morale are not well suited for either a protracted struggle or a major attack that catches the island off guard.

First, Taiwan’s recruiting and retention challenges mean that it does not have enough well-trained troops to wage a long fight. The sheer disparity between the Chinese and Taiwanese populations of course means that the PLA will always dwarf the Taiwanese military. Yet Taiwan has consistently struggled to get the most out of the human resources that it does have. Endemic recruiting shortfalls in the all-volunteer force played a major role in President Tsai Ing-wen’s decision to extend conscription.¹³

The problem is particularly acute in frontline ground combat units. Some of these units are reportedly at 60 percent of their authorized end strength.¹⁴ Longer terms of conscription could help address this gap—but only up to a point. As we discuss below, the existing plan for using conscripts entails training and equipping them to handle rear-area security and infrastructure protection missions, not frontline combat

roles. What is more, it will take three years before the one-year conscription scheme is fully up and running.¹⁵ Even then, with some conscripts seeking waivers or pursuing “substitute service” in nonmilitary roles, Taiwan’s frontline combat units could still find themselves understaffed. And although these challenges are most pronounced in the enlisted ranks, the MND also struggles to recruit officers. It has therefore also had to repeatedly lower the physical requirements and mental standards for all three of its commissioning pathways: the service academies, reserve officer training corps, and postgraduation direct-commission programs.

Second, Taiwanese doctrine and equipment are predicated on two potentially untenable assumptions. One, that the scale of Chinese preparations for invasion will give ample advanced warning and therefore time for Taiwan to mobilize and posture its forces. And two, that Taiwanese forces can go toe-to-toe with a Chinese invasion force in a decisive fight for control over Taiwanese airspace, sea-lanes, and territory. Both assumptions are problematic. Analysts are also increasingly concerned that China will use large-scale exercises and gray-zone activities to mask its preparations while lulling Taiwan into a false sense of security. Moreover, as the cross-strait military balance tips further and further in China’s favor, the PLA will soon be in a position to overwhelm Taiwanese defenders both quantitatively and qualitatively.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Taiwan has been slow to reorient its military toward adopting the large numbers of small, mobile, lethal, and cheap weapons discussed in chapter 5.

Third, Taiwanese military training is neither realistic nor rigorous. Recruits spend more time listening to administrative briefs, practicing close order drill, and doing yard work than they do learning combat tactics, techniques, and procedures; first aid; logistics; and land navigation.¹⁷ Those responsible for leading individual and small-unit training—noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and junior officers—are themselves not well versed in modern training methods. Unit-level field training among active-duty units is not much better. Exercises are highly scripted.¹⁸ Subordinates worry about passing “bad news” up the chain of command. Senior officers micromanage, obsessing over tasks

that Western militaries let NCOs handle. Changing this top-heavy, highly centralized command culture will take time and dedicated effort.

Fourth, while Taiwan's reserve force will be critical to a prolonged defense of the country, few Taiwanese or American analysts think that the MND will be able to mobilize, train, and equip even a fraction of the country's eligible reservists in a crisis.¹⁹ Indeed, only 300,000 or so of Taiwan's total pool of reservists are actually required to participate in refresher training under long-standing regulations.²⁰ Moreover, these reservists are obligated to do so for only five days *every other year*. And in practice most are recalled less often than that, since capacity limitations mean the military can train only around 110,000 reservists annually.²¹ Worse yet, reservists waste most of this precious time attending PowerPoint briefings and filling out administrative paperwork.²² Credible reports indicate that the army does not have enough rifles or gear to equip more than a fraction of its reservists.

Fifth, Taiwan lacks the military stockpiles it will need to wage a prolonged defense of its main island, much less outlying islands. Much attention has been paid to Taiwan's energy and food needs.²³ Yet the problem extends to the Taiwanese military. Even in peacetime Taiwan's military struggles to find parts for its many foreign-acquired weapons. As a result, less than half of the tanks, armored personnel carriers, and self-propelled artillery vehicles acquired from abroad are fully operational at any given point in time.²⁴ Shortages also plague Taiwan's fleet of aircraft. Less than half could be ready for immediate action in a war—a problem made worse by the heavy wear and tear caused by flying intercept missions in response to Chinese “gray-zone” provocations.²⁵ High-profile aviation mishaps have become increasingly common.²⁶ Alarming, the MND does not have nearly enough munitions for a high-intensity fight.²⁷ Such stockpiles will prove essential given that China will do everything it can to cut Taiwan off from the rest of the world in an invasion scenario. At least one open-source report suggests that Taiwan might have less than half of the munitions it will need for just two days of air combat.²⁸ Taiwan's ground forces may face similar shortages in terms of small arms, ammunition, individual weapons, helmets, and flak jackets.²⁹

Finally, and perhaps most important, Taiwan's military has a morale problem—one that taints the way in which it is seen by society. Military service is not prestigious and does not confer the same social status in Taiwan that it does in other small nations facing difficult odds, such as Finland, Estonia, and Israel.

To understand why, it is important to remember the MND's origin as the armed forces of the nationalist government. Much in the same way that the PLA is a politicized military directly beholden to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), for decades the Taiwanese military was under the command of, and served as the enforcement arm for, the authoritarian KMT regime. To many Taiwanese, Taiwan's MND has not modernized and fully nationalized to keep up with Taiwan's process of democratization. Taiwanese voters are also all too aware that not a single person in the entire active military has ever seen combat. It is therefore an untested organization that has not and never *had* to change. Meanwhile, high-profile hazing incidents have soured the military's image in the eyes of younger Taiwanese and the services are plagued by corruption and espionage cases. The cumulative result is a military sapped of self-confidence and estranged from the society it defends.

The aforementioned lack of rigor and realism in training could be making the morale problem worse. Many conscripts and reservists think of their service as a waste of time precisely because it is so lacking in substance. Such views may reflect—or drive—a broader skepticism about the degree to which Taiwan's military is ready to protect the island against invasion. Little wonder, then, that Taiwan is still struggling to meet its recruiting quotas even as a growing percentage of Taiwanese claim, paradoxically, that they would be willing to defend Taiwan in the event of war.

The Military Taiwan Wants

To be sure, Taiwan's political leaders know about these problems and have taken steps to address them. President Tsai unveiled the most important of such reform initiatives in a nationally televised address

on December 27, 2022.³⁰ Her decision to extend conscription from four months to one year understandably dominated headlines. But her speech also laid out a blueprint for how Taiwan's military should reorganize itself to defend against an invasion.

President Tsai described a defense of Taiwan anchored on four mutually reinforcing elements: a main battle force, a standing garrison force, a civil defense system, and a reserve force. Serving as Taiwan's first line of defense, the main battle force will be responsible for conducting air, sea, and ground combat operations against an invading force. Because it will need to be highly motivated, well trained, well equipped, and ready to fight on short notice, President Tsai's plan is to organize the bulk of this 210,000-strong main battle force around Taiwan's 188,000 active-duty soldiers, sailors, air personnel, and marines, augmented by up to 22,000 conscripts.³¹

Meanwhile, the garrison force will handle the proverbial "home front" by protecting roads, bridges, intersections, hospitals, airfields, and other critical infrastructure; handling rear-area security tasks such as guarding command posts and resupply points; and coordinating local defensive actions against invading units that might infiltrate the front line. Historically, Taiwan's reserve forces handled these tasks. President Tsai, however, worried that reserve units might take too long to mobilize. She therefore shifted the garrison mission to the conscript force, since these troops will already be trained and on active duty.³² Indeed, one of the reasons she extended conscription from four months to one year was to ensure that Taiwan's short-term conscripts are adequately prepared to handle this critical task.

The civil defense system will support both forces. Consisting of central and local government agencies augmented by alternative military service personnel and volunteers, civil defense units will help coordinate disaster relief, distribute essential supplies, relay critical information, oversee public safety, and conduct emergency repairs.³³

Finally, President Tsai called for streamlining and repurposing Taiwan's massive but unwieldy reserve force.³⁴ Instead of mobilizing to field stand-alone units for frontline combat and garrison defense—for which there might not be enough time in an invasion

scenario—reservists will now fall into one of two categories. Those with previous experience serving as full-time, active-duty service members (e.g., military retirees and those who separated from the military before qualifying for a pension) will be placed in reserve units that support and replenish the main battle force. Former conscripts, on the other hand, will be organized into units that feed into the garrison force. Here too, President Tsai said that a longer period of conscription will help reduce the amount of time it will take to prepare reservists designated to support the garrison force.

Whether President Tsai's successor, Lai Ching-te, will retain, alter, or discard this plan remains to be seen.³⁵

President Tsai clearly recognized that these organizational changes were not, by themselves, sufficient. Openly acknowledging that “many citizens feel their time in the military was wasted,” she sought to preempt concerns that yearlong conscription was simply going to triple the wastage by directing the National Security Council (NSC) and the MND to improve military training by studying and, where appropriate, emulating how the United States and other advanced militaries prepare for war.³⁶ She likewise called on the Taiwanese military to make sure conscripts and reservists spend more time handling advanced weapons (such as Javelin antitank missiles, Stinger antiair missiles, and drones), conducting live-fire exercises, practicing close combat skills, and working alongside other military and civil defense units. President Tsai also sought to reduce public skepticism—particularly among younger citizens impacted by the new mandatory service requirements—by signaling her commitment to improving morale and the quality of life among conscripts. Key changes along these lines included increasing conscript pay so that it at least comes close to minimum wage rates and ensuring that conscripts' time spent in uniform will “count” for retirement and pension purposes.

Nor should the reforms announced in December 2022 be taken in isolation. Two preceding changes to the reserve force helped set the stage. In May 2021, the Tsai administration created a new agency within the MND to coordinate reserve mobilization. Created by merging two existing, lower-level entities, the All-Out Defense Mobilization

Agency was tasked with improving reserve training, coordinating across relevant ministries (including those responsible for public health and safety), and coordinating combined exercises with US National Guard units. The Tsai administration elevated the All-Out Defense Mobilization Agency's stature within the Ministry of National Defense and increased the size of its full-time staff to 150.

The second significant change came in early 2022, when the MND unveiled a new pilot program for reserve training.³⁷ As highlighted above, Taiwanese reservists are typically recalled for five to seven days of training a maximum of four times over an eight-year period. Under the new system, reservists will participate in a fourteen-day training exercise, albeit only twice over an eight-year period. (As a practical matter, reservists therefore spend the same amount of time training under both schemes.) But whereas the existing annual weeklong training program mostly entails lectures and close order drill, the MND's goal is to make the fourteen-day training plan as rigorous and realistic as possible. Although the MND intends to assess this pilot program through at least 2025, the plan is to send fifteen thousand reservists a year through the fourteen-day training cycle, with priority going to reservists who have recently completed their mandatory service.

Building a Better Military

President Tsai's blueprint for defense reform is an improvement on the status quo. Even so, a military organized, trained, and equipped along these lines will, by itself, still struggle to deter—let alone defeat—a determined Chinese attack, because it does not address the fundamental challenges posed by strategic surprise and protraction. Nor are these ongoing reforms a silver bullet for solving the interconnected problems of institutional culture, public perception, and organizational morale.

To ensure that Taiwan's defense posture is built on the strongest foundation possible, we suggest that Taiwan's newly elected president, Lai Ching-te, reinforce these aforementioned military reforms in three ways.

Clean House within the MND

First, it is time to “clean house” within the MND. The main obstacles to meaningful and enduring change stem from bureaucratic resistance—not from ignorance of what needs to be done. Therefore, Taiwan’s new administration should identify and promote officers—regardless of rank—who support change, are willing to explore and embrace new war-fighting concepts, and agree that national defense is a whole-of-society mission. In turn, this younger, more invigorated military leadership should prioritize or otherwise invest in professional military education as well as realistic and rigorous training methods based on the most relevant models around the world. Most challenging of all, these new military leaders must begin the painstaking, but urgent, work of building a culture of initiative, toughness, and risk acceptance at all levels of the Taiwanese military apparatus.

Look to Israel, not the United States, as the Archetype

Second, although the United States is and should continue to be the most important military training partner of Taiwan, the US military is not the best model for Taiwan. Small countries facing large foes, such as Ukraine, Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, and, perhaps most of all, Israel, are better archetypes. Taiwan should closely observe the defense concepts and cultures of these countries and rapidly adapt best practices for Taiwan.

Take Israel, which has less than half Taiwan’s population and lacks the seas and mountains that protect Taiwan. Yet Israel has, by itself, won every war it has fought and—until Hamas’s murderous rampage on October 7, 2023—deterred enemies from attempting an invasion for fifty years, despite facing numerically superior and technologically sophisticated foes such as Iran.

The secret ingredient that serves to catalyze all others into effective deterrence is culture.

In Israel, young men and women participate in compulsory military service—a minimum of thirty-two months for men and twenty-four months for women. They train frequently and realistically as reservists. After their active-duty service, Israelis tend to stick with, and train

with, the same reserve units for many years, creating cohesive fighting teams that can mobilize quickly.

Military service is held in high esteem across Israeli society. Men and women compete to serve in the most elite units the way Americans compete to enter Ivy League schools. And soldiers acquire leadership and technical skills that enrich Israel's economy and prosperous technology sector.

Israel also maintains robust civil defense capabilities that offer a potential model for Taiwan.

We recommend that Taiwan bring over retired officers and non-commissioned officers from Israel (and perhaps from the other countries just mentioned) to engage in hands-on, long-term work to improve the organization and training of all components of Taiwan's national defense. While Israel may balk at official government exchanges given its diplomatic relations with Beijing, there is plenty that can be done in the unofficial domain. The readiness of Israel, or at least individual Israeli retired officers and defense specialists, to advise Taiwan in these ways has surely increased in light of Beijing's aggressively anti-Israeli diplomatic and propaganda posture in the wake of the Hamas terrorist attacks last October.

Establish a Territorial Defense Corps within the Ministry of the Interior

Third, Taiwan must make national defense a whole-of-society mission. This means that the MND should not be expected to shoulder the sole responsibility for Taiwan's security or receive by default most of the related budget and resources. To this end, the president should establish a local (or "territorial") defense corps within the Ministry of the Interior. While national service should continue to form the backbone of this scheme, military-aged Taiwanese citizens—regardless of gender—should have an alternative way to serve. Namely, they should be able to choose between serving as a one-year conscript in the Taiwanese army and joining a local defense force modeled on civil resistance schemes such as the Estonian Defense League. Thus, these units should be recruited from the communities in which they will train

and, in the event of war, fight. Their volunteers should have access to well-stocked armories with sufficient numbers of modern weapons, ammunition, and protective gear. Local defense forces should also routinely work alongside emergency responders to be ready to respond to natural disasters, such as typhoons and earthquakes.

To be clear, although such local defense forces cannot defeat a large-scale invasion by themselves, they can make it much harder for China to achieve a quick, surprise victory by showing that the Taiwanese people have the ability to quickly resist and recover from acts of sabotage, subversion, assassination, and war. In a similar vein, a robust network of local defenses will help prepare Taiwan for prolonged conflict. Simply put, even if China manages to overwhelm Taiwan's front-line combat forces, it still needs to control the Taiwanese people. A well-organized, trained, and equipped local defense force makes doing so far harder. At best, the visible presence of such local forces in every Taiwanese community could help persuade Xi that an invasion will not succeed at a price he is willing to pay. At worst, if deterrence fails, a local defense force campaign can generate international sympathy for Taiwan's plight while buying time for the United States and its allies to respond in ways outlined in subsequent chapters of this book.

Most important of all, a robust local defense system will help convince the Taiwanese people that resistance is possible and that they have a meaningful role to play in—and a realistic way to provide for—their own defense.

Why bypass the MND by establishing this territorial defense corps within the Ministry of the Interior? One reason is that the MND has thus far resisted all attempts and recommendations to establish such a force—even those offered by Taiwan's former chief of the General Staff.³⁸ Another reason is that placing territorial defense under the Ministry of the Interior's aegis will allow the MND to focus its reform efforts on organizing, training, and equipping the main battle force to keep the enemy off Taiwan's beaches. As a matter of practical necessity, Taiwan's new president should allocate defense spending—and the transfer of weapons, gear, and equipment—between the MND and the Ministry of the Interior to ensure that this new territorial defense

corps has what it needs to get up and running as quickly as possible. Taiwanese political leaders should be willing to let these two ministries compete with one another by investing in whichever one is most proactive about addressing Taiwan's defensive needs.³⁹

To ensure that the Ministry of National Defense and the Ministry of the Interior are coordinating their efforts, the president should empower the secretary-general of the National Security Council to oversee, in close coordination with the premier, a whole-of-society national defense. At a minimum, this new local defense scheme will need enough initial funding to jump-start recruiting, organizing, equipping, and training. Thankfully, instead of needing to build such a force out of whole cloth, the Ministry of the Interior can build on—or even integrate—existing grassroots organizations such as the Forward Alliance.⁴⁰

Obstacles and the Way Forward

Change is hard.⁴¹ While Taiwan is already taking important steps in the right direction, we are hopeful that President Lai will consider some of the ideas we offer above. If he does, he will invariably run into a number of obstacles. We conclude by suggesting solutions to three of the most significant ones.

Critics will point to material constraints as a reason to settle for Taiwan's suboptimal readiness for war. No question about it: training space is limited. So, too, are critical facilities such as barracks, ammunition supply points, armories, and firing ranges. Munitions, parts, weapons, and protective gear to equip its entire active-duty force, let alone anything more than a fraction of its reservists, are also in short supply. Acquiring more training space, building more military infrastructure, and buying more essential gear should therefore be among a new administration's most urgent priorities.

Critics will also argue that budgetary realities will impede the pursuit of these essential items (a point we address below). Yet the fact is that Taiwan and the MND continue to spend Taiwan's scarce defense dollars on flashy and expensive weapons platforms that are unlikely to

survive a surprise attack or a protracted war.⁴² Diverting funds from costly, doctrinally unsound programs like the indigenous diesel submarine and Yushan-class amphibious assault ship would free up resources to build, buy, and stockpile lower-cost, highly lethal things that will allow Taiwan to fight tonight—and for as long as it takes thereafter.

Of course, pursuing the types of reforms we suggest above will require more money than cutting a few big-ticket items will save. The hard political fact is that while the Tsai administration did an admirable job of increasing defense-spending levels from US\$11 billion in 2018 to US\$19 billion in 2023 (special defense budgets included), Taiwan will need to spend even more to get its defenses where they need to be. That Taiwan already spends 22 percent of its national budget on defense means its elected leaders must be prepared to make difficult changes to existing fiscal and tax policies.⁴³

Increased reliance on conscripts should help reduce some of the costs associated with fielding a larger and more capable ground defense, especially since a plurality of Taiwan's defense budget goes to cover personnel costs and benefits (both of which have gone up significantly in recent years in an attempt to attract more recruits). Nevertheless, President Lai will need to explain to Taiwanese voters why taxes must go up and/or why social welfare spending must go down. Although such moves are a hard sell in any democracy, we think the Taiwanese people will be far more amenable to such sacrifices if they can see that their tax dollars are being spent in ways that tangibly and meaningfully improve their nation's defenses while also reducing the risk of an even costlier war.

This is yet another benefit of creating a local defense force. By training in the communities they will defend, they will stand as tangible proof that Taiwan can protect itself and that taxpayer money is being put to use in ways that can help Taiwan in times of war and peace. Moreover, depending on how a local defense corps is ultimately structured, they could meaningfully enhance Taiwanese defenses for pennies on the proverbial dollar. This has been the experience of the Estonian Defense League. With sixteen thousand members, it is larger than Estonia's entire active-duty military. Yet because every member

is an unpaid volunteer, the Estonian government has to spend money only on training and gear.⁴⁴

But to reiterate: the single biggest obstacle to rapid transformation emanates from within the MND itself. Under President Tsai, the MND resisted, slow-rolled, or watered down virtually every meaningful reform initiative.⁴⁵ True, this problem is not unique to Taiwan. Military bureaucracies are notoriously resistant to change.⁴⁶ Ukraine had to clean house within the ranks of its own military after 2014.⁴⁷ Senior US officers, as discussed elsewhere in this book, have declined to manufacture precisely the antiship munitions needed to deter or defeat a PLA invasion of Taiwan. But the fact remains that any path toward meaningful defense reform will need to deal with the MND's entrenched bureaucratic interests and its institutional culture.

If Taiwan's new president is serious about deterring a catastrophic war, he will have no choice but to expend significant political capital to make the necessary changes, up to and including relieving any senior general or admiral who inhibits reform. Washington can and should help. And not simply by deploying a few dozen mobile teams prepared to conduct only small-unit training. Transformation, as we highlighted above, must be holistic.⁴⁸ Washington should be prepared to support top-down, bottom-up, and inside-out reform through bilateral training in both Taiwan and the United States. Washington should also facilitate robust interaction between Taiwan's military (and, hopefully, its local defense corps) and Ukrainian, Estonian, and Israeli training teams. Perhaps most important of all, Congress and the US president should be willing to play the "bad guy" by insisting on reform, even if it requires imposing clear conditions on Taipei. Doing so could prove invaluable in terms of letting Taiwan's next president honestly claim that his hands are tied.

Regardless of how Lai Ching-te decides to pursue change, national defense reform must be his top priority. He must build a culture that will strengthen deterrence and ensure that Taiwan remains a guardian, rather than a victim, at the frontier of liberty and democracy. Simply put, Taiwan is not ready to go to war with the army it has. And it may have only limited time to build the army it needs.

NOTES

1. Scholars refer to this as deterrence by denial. See Glenn H. Snyder, “Deterrence and Power,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 4, no. 2 (June 1960): 163. See also chapters 6, 7, and 12 of this book. To be sure, some analysts and officials want Taiwan to pursue deterrence by punishment—to threaten to inflict intolerable pain on the Chinese mainland in retaliation for an attack. But in our estimation, short of acquiring nuclear weapons, there is no realistic way Taiwan can amass sufficient conventional firepower to credibly exceed Xi’s pain threshold, especially if he is already willing to stomach a war with the United States.
2. Ian Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan’s Defense and American Strategy in Asia* (Arlington, VA: Project 2049 Institute, 2017), 67–93; John Culver, “How We Would Know When China Is Preparing to Invade Taiwan,” *Commentary*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 3, 2022.
3. Ministry of National Defense, *ROC National Defense Report 2023*, 26–59. See also Ethan Kessler, *Taiwan’s Security Future: How Domestic Politics Impact Taipei’s Defense* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2023), 5.
4. Taiwan also has a volunteer civil defense organization made up of approximately 420,000 part-time volunteers. Although we discuss this organization in more detail below, it is worth highlighting at the outset that there are serious questions about how many of these volunteers are actually trained, able, and willing to support civil defense operations in a conflict. Focus Taiwan, “Civil Defense Reforms Needed to Meet Taiwan’s Defense Goals: Experts,” CNA English News, January 24, 2023.
5. The Ministry of National Defense is supported by an additional twenty-seven thousand civilian employees.
6. Ninety-four thousand of these service members are in the army, forty thousand are in the navy, thirty thousand are in the air force, and ten thousand are in the marine corps.
7. The reserve force consists of service members who have completed their voluntary or mandatory military services, provided they have not aged out (at thirty-six years old for most conscripts and fifty years old for noncommissioned officers).
8. Focus Taiwan, “Military to Present Report This Year on Extending Military Service,” CNA English News, March 23, 2022.
9. Focus Taiwan, “Taiwan’s Military Says Capacity Sufficient to Train One-Year Conscripts,” CNA English News, January 5, 2023.
10. The figures that follow are from *The Military Balance 2023: The Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics* (London, UK: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023), 291–93.

11. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress*, US Department of Defense, September 9, 2020, 114; US-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC), *2020 Annual Report to Congress of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, "Chapter 4. Taiwan," December 2020.
12. Mike Pieutrucha, "Amateur Hour Part I: The Chinese Invasion of Taiwan," *War on the Rocks*, May 18, 2022; Tanner Greer, "Why I Fear for Taiwan," *Scholars Stage* (blog), September 11, 2020.
13. As of 2018, Taiwan's armed forces were at 80 percent of their authorized end-strength of 188,000 active-duty billets. Paul Huang, "Taiwan's Military Is a Hollow Shell," *Foreign Policy*, February 15, 2020; President Tsai was in office as this book was going to press. Elections in Taiwan in early 2024 indicated Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party as her successor, with an inauguration date of May 20. Tsai was ineligible to seek reelection because of term limits.
14. Huang, "Taiwan's Military Is a Hollow Shell."
15. For example, only 9,100 Taiwanese men will be inducted for one-year service in 2024. That number will not hit the expected maximum of 53,600 per year until 2029. "MND Shares 2029 Conscript Target," *Taipei Times*, March 6, 2023.
16. Michael A. Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, *A Question of Time: Enhancing Taiwan's Conventional Deterrence Posture* (Arlington, VA: Center for Security Policy Studies, 2018), 20.
17. Greer, "Why I Fear for Taiwan"; Panel, "Is Taiwan Ready for War? Views from Taipei, Beijing, and Washington," George Mason University, YouTube video, October 11, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2b05yO7EfWM>; off-the-record interviews conducted by the authors with Taiwanese military officers and policymakers in February 2019 and February 2021.
18. This and what follows are from off-the-record interviews conducted by the authors with Taiwanese and American military officers, elected officials, think tank scholars, policymakers, and diplomats in February 2019, January 2021, February 2021, and June 2023.
19. Michael Mazza, "Time to Harden the Last Line of Defense: Taiwan's Reserve Force," *Global Taiwan Brief* 5, no. 8 (April 22, 2020).
20. Mike Stokes, Yang kuang-shu, and Eric Lee, *Preparing for the Nightmare: Readiness and Ad Hoc Coalition Operations in the Taiwan Strait* (Arlington, VA: Project 49 Institute, 2020), 22.
21. "Military Mulls Requiring Female Veterans to Join Reservist Training," Taiwan Newswire, March 8, 2022.

22. Wendell Minnick, "How to Save Taiwan from Itself," *National Interest*, March 19, 2019.
23. Taiwan to Boost Energy Inventories Amid China Threat," Reuters, October 23, 2022; Gustavo F. Ferreira and Jamie A. Critelli, "Taiwan's Food Resiliency—or Not—in a Conflict with China," *US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2023): 39–60; Jude Blanchette and Bonnie Glaser, "Taiwan's Most Pressing Challenge Is Strangulation, Not Invasion," *War on the Rocks*, November 9, 2023.
24. Paul Huang, "Taiwan's Military Has Flashy American Weapons but No Ammo," *Foreign Policy*, August 20, 2020.
25. Stokes, Yang, and Lee, *Preparing for the Nightmare*, 37, 39.
26. Vincent Ni, "Taiwan Suspends F-16 Fleet Combat Training After Jet Crashes into Sea," *The Guardian*, January 11, 2022; "Taiwan Air Force Suspends Training After Second Fatal Accident in 2022," Reuters, May 30, 2022; Cindy Wang, "Taiwan Pilot Dies in Third Military Jet Crash This Year," Bloomberg, May 30, 2022.
27. David Axe, "What Good Is an Attack Submarine with No Torpedoes? Taiwan Wants to Know," *Forbes*, November 16, 2021.
28. Minnick, "How to Save Taiwan."
29. Off-the-record interviews with Taiwanese military officers conducted by the authors, February 2019 and June 2023.
30. Office of the President of the Republic of China (Taiwan), "President Tsai Announces Military Force Realignment Plan," December 17, 2022.
31. President Tsai's speech did not clarify the specific number of conscripts needed to augment the active-duty force to bring the main battle force to its full strength of 210,000. The MND has subsequently indicated that it plans to use one-year conscripts to bring the main battle force up to full strength. Qiu Caiwei, "Conscription Service Extended by One Year, Conscripts Assigned to High Mountain Military Posts for Defense Duty," *United Daily News*, November 23, 2023. For reference, the MND reports an end strength of approximately 215,000 full-time personnel, 27,000 of whom are either civilian employees of the ministry or trainees, cadets, students, or absentee personnel, yielding 188,000 uniformed servicemen and women. Luo Tianbin, "國防部:108年要募兵2.1萬人 110年以後每年減為1萬人," *Liberty Times Net*, October 21, 2018.
32. President Tsai's plan calls for conscript units to be built around an active-duty cadre.
33. In theory, Taiwan has more than 420,000 such volunteers. However, the degree to which these volunteers are trained, physically capable, and mentally willing to serve in a conflict is unclear given the historically low levels of funding for civil defense training and the fact that the average age of a civil

- defense volunteer is sixty. Focus Taiwan, “Civil Defense Reforms Needed to Meet Taiwan’s Defense Goals: Experts,” Central News Agency English News, January 24, 2023.
34. Taiwan has approximately 1.7 million reservists, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2023*, 291.
 35. There is also the question of whether the Ministry of National Defense and the Armed Forces will make a good-faith effort to adopt these reforms.
 36. Office of the President of the Republic of China (Taiwan), “President Tsai Announces Military Force Realignment Plan.”
 37. Aaron Tu and Jake Chung, “Military Revamps Reservist Training,” *Taipei Times*, December 10, 2021.
 38. Admiral Lee Hsi-min and Michael A. Hunzeker, “The View of Ukraine from Taiwan: Get Real about Territorial Defense,” *War on the Rocks*, March 15, 2022.
 39. There is a robust scholarly literature supporting the idea that political leaders can harness bureaucratic competition to increase civilian control and foster innovative behavior. See Harvey M. Sapolsky, *The Polaris System Development: Bureaucratic and Programmatic Success in Government* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Deborah D. Avant, “The Institutional Sources of Military Doctrine: Hegemons in Peripheral Wars,” *International Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (December 1993): 409–30; Owen Reid Cote, “The Politics of Innovative Military Doctrine: The United States Navy and Fleet Ballistic Missiles” (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996); Harvey M. Sapolsky, Eugene Gholz, and Caitlin Talmadge, *US Defense Politics: The Origins of Security Policy* (London, UK: Routledge, 2014), 32–54.
 40. One of the coauthors, Enoch Wu, founded Forward Alliance.
 41. There is an extensive academic literature documenting the numerous challenges and obstacles that military organizations face when attempting to change. See, for example, Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); Stephen P. Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Austin Long, *The Soul of Armies: Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Military Culture in the US and UK* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Michael A. Hunzeker, *Dying to Learn: Wartime Lessons from the Western Front* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).
 42. Kessler, *Taiwan’s Security Future*.
 43. Keoni Everington, “Taiwan Increases Defense Budget by 13.9% for 2023, Rising to 2.4% of GDP,” *Taiwan News*, August 25, 2022.
 44. Alexander Lanoska and Michael A. Hunzeker, *Conventional Deterrence and Landpower in Northeastern Europe* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2019), 34.

45. Michael A. Hunzeker, “Taiwan’s Defense Plans Are Going Off the Rails,” *War on the Rocks*, November 18, 2021.
46. James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy, Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Rosen, *Winning the Next War*.
47. Valeriy Akimenko, “Ukraine’s Toughest Fight: The Challenge of Military Reform,” Carnegie Endowment, February 22, 2018.
48. Jerad I. Harper and Michael A. Hunzeker, “Learning to Train: What Washington and Taipei Can Learn from Security Cooperation in Ukraine and the Baltic States,” *War on the Rocks*, January 20, 2023.