

Shaping Taiwan's Defense Future: U.S. Support & Cooperation

Michael A. Hunzeker

Associate Professor

Schar School of Policy & Government

George Mason University

Executive Summary

Taiwanese defenses are improving thanks to the Tsai & Lai administrations' hard work. But the job is not done. Four priorities are especially urgent. Specifically, Taiwan's military needs:

1. An overarching asymmetric doctrine to guide reform, training, & warfighting
2. To be ready to mobilize quickly & to defend in depth for a prolonged period of time
3. To prepare its officers & non-commissioned officers for decentralized command-and-control
4. To increase its stockpiles of munitions, parts, and gear

The next US presidential administration can help Taiwan address these critical tasks by:

1. Taking 'big ticket' arms sales off the table for the next four years
2. Working with the Lai administration to develop a roadmap for reform
3. Supporting a holistic training program that includes a major increase in Taiwanese units training in the US
4. Using PDAs to transfer gear for reserve units & facilitating co-production to assist with stockpiling

The invasion threat should drive defense planning in Washington & Taipei

It bears repeating: Xi Jinping wants to annex Taiwan.¹ He of course prefers to do so without resorting to war. Yet his attempts to coerce Taiwan by means of an 'Anaconda' strategy designed to strangle Taiwanese resolve and 'gray zone' provocations intended to 'boil the frog' are not working.² If anything, they are pushing Taiwan further away.

Xi may therefore conclude that he has to 'roll the iron dice' if he wants to annex Taiwan in this lifetime. After all, invasion and occupation are the only surefire way to subjugate a population that otherwise refuses to submit.

Prioritizing the invasion threat is the most effective way to convince Xi that war is too costly and too risky.³ Focusing on other forms of aggression—even if they are more likely than all-out war—undermines cross-Strait deterrence, because strategies and capabilities designed to deal with 'lesser' threats may not work against a full-scale invasion. Conversely, if Taiwan is ready for all-out war, it is hard to imagine that any amount of military saber rattling, diplomatic isolation, or economic strangulation will compel the Taiwanese people to yield.

Thankfully, Taiwan is getting (more) serious about the invasion threat...

Taiwan is undoubtedly better prepared for all-out war than it was just eight years ago. Under Presidents Tsai Ing-wen and Lai Ching-te, defense spending has gone from less than 2% of GDP in 2016 to nearly 2.5% of GDP in 2024.⁴ Presidents Tsai and Lai likewise introduced a range of noteworthy reforms, to include:

- Lengthening conscription from four months to one year⁵
- Updating wartime plans for using active-duty volunteers, active-duty conscripts, and reservists
- Pursuing larger numbers of genuinely asymmetric weapons (*e.g.*, Harpoons, Stingers, & drones)⁶
- Creating a defense innovation unit to facilitate the rapid acquisition of off-the-shelf capabilities⁷
- Putting a civilian minister in charge of the Ministry of National Defense⁸
- And establishing a Whole-of-Society Resilience Committee⁹

Nor should we overlook the role that private citizens and non-governmental organizations are playing.

- Thousands of volunteers have volunteered for crisis training with Forward Alliance and Kuma Academy
- Robert Tsao helped fund the *Zero Day* miniseries to improve social awareness the
- Public polls suggest that most Taiwanese are willing to fight to defend against an invasion¹⁰

Washington's security cooperation efforts are also yielding positive results. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the combination of technical training in conjunction with Foreign Military Sales (FMS) programs, combat training led by US training teams operating in Taiwan, and unit-level training conducted at bases in the United States is leading to increased proficiency among frontline Taiwanese combat units.

...But it still has a long way to go

These are impressive and meaningful changes, but a lot of work remains unfinished. Unfortunately, some of the most glaring shortcomings exist within Taiwan's armed forces.¹¹

Conceptually, Taiwanese military planning is based on questionable assumptions. For example, it:

- Thinks it will have ample early warning & so is not ready to mobilize quickly and/or while under attack
- Is planning for a short war & is therefore not prepared to fight a long one
- Intends to defeat an invasion force at sea & so lacks a plan if the PLA gets ashore... or is already there

Doctrinally, the services have yet to embrace asymmetry, as evidenced by the fact that they still:

- Lack an overarching asymmetric warfare doctrine to guide operations, training, & acquisitions
- Spend too much money on 'big ticket' platforms like submarines, tanks, & amphibious assault ships
- Refuse to organize & integrate territorial defense into their warfighting plans

Organizationally, although defense spending is up, the military lacks key resources, including:

- Training space to conduct realistic & rigorous live-fire exercises
- Enough gear (*e.g.*, rifles, helmets, and flak jackets) to equip all of its reserve combat units at the same time
- Sufficient stockpiles of munitions & parts

Culturally, Taiwan's military is not well-prepared to adapt to the modern battlefield given that it:

- Does not have enough junior officers & non-commissioned officers
- Has too many generals and admirals (nearly double the proportion found in the US military)
- Exhibits a highly centralized culture that impedes initiative seeking & creative problem solving

And socially, Taiwanese civil-military relations remain tense:

- Polls say the Taiwanese people will to fight, yet they are not volunteering to serve in sufficient numbers
- Some older voters still associate the military with martial law and authoritarian rule
- Many younger voters think that military pay and prestige remain too low

The United States can help with training and resources & 'tough love'

These are daunting challenges. Time is also running low, because military transformation often takes years—if not generations.¹² But as long as Taiwan is willing to embrace change, Washington can help. Specifically, the next presidential administration should consider taking the following four interrelated steps.

First, it should tell Taipei that 'big ticket' FMS will remain 'off the table' for at least the next four years. There are many reasons for doing so. Taiwan arguably has all the fighter jets and surface ships it needs to conduct 'gray zone' intercept operations. In any case, additional jets and ships are already in the FMS and indigenous production pipelines. In fact, it is reasonable to question the Ministry of National Defense's ability to absorb this influx of weapons. And as a practical matter, the FMS backlog is such that Taiwan is unlikely to receive any high-end weapons that the next administration might decide to sell it for years.¹³ (The next administration should of course

continue to sign FMS deals for genuinely asymmetric capabilities—as defined by Washington—while doing everything it can to solve the FMS bottleneck so as to deliver on the weapons it has already promised). But the most compelling reason for pausing ‘big ticket’ FMS deals is to allow Taipei and Washington to focus on addressing longstanding problems with doctrine, training, maintenance, and culture.

Second, it should assist the Lai administration develop a roadmap for reform. Defense transformation is a complex undertaking that necessarily involves countless government agencies, private companies, and nongovernmental organizations. Washington and Taipei also have to find a way to cooperate, in the face of serious resource constraints, and fast enough to impact China’s calculus. An overarching blueprint, with agreed upon milestones, will help both sides orchestrate their efforts. It will allow Washington to measure progress and tailor its support, while giving Taiwanese civilian officials a tool for maintaining oversight. The single most important milestone in this plan—one on which the next administration should insist—is the dissemination of a military doctrine for defending Taiwan asymmetrically. Taiwan’s Armed Forces have not had such an overarching asymmetric plan to coordinate operations, training, and acquisitions since rejecting Admiral Lee Hsi-min’s Overall Defense Concept.¹⁴

Third, it should seek authorization and funding to support a comprehensive training program for Taiwan’s military. Existing efforts, which include technical training conducted as part of existing FMS deals, a few hundred US military personnel leading individual and small-unit-level training in Taiwan, and sending a handful of Taiwanese Army units to the United States for training, are a good start. But they are not nearly enough to support the rapid transformation of Taiwan’s military into a credible warfighting force. Any such effort should include:

- A much larger US (& allied) footprint in Taiwan¹⁵
- A significant increase in the number of Taiwan Army battalions sent to the United States for training¹⁶
- Integrating Taiwanese staffs into (unclassified) U.S. combined arms exercises
- Ensuring that Taiwanese officers sent to the US for PME spend time with OSD(P) & on the Hill
- Liaison programs to allow civilian defense experts from both parties to do the same
- The creation of a US-based asymmetric defense course for Taiwanese generals and admirals

Finally, it should seek additional rounds of PDA and, when appropriate, facilitate defense co-production to help Taiwan stockpile parts and munitions. The need for increased stockpiling should be self-evident. Taiwanese units already suffer from a lack of munitions and parts. Such shortages will grow far worse once the shooting starts, not least because military planners routinely under-estimate the speed with which units expend ammunition. And Washington will struggle to resupply Taiwan in the face of an all-out invasion. The next administration should also use PDA to ensure that Taiwan has enough gear to mobilize all of its frontline reserve units at the same time. As things stand, the Ministry of National Defense only has enough basic equipment to supply a fraction of the reserve units that exist on paper.

¹ Matt Pottinger, “The Stormy Seas of a Major Test,” in Matt Pottinger ed., *The Boiling Moat: Urgent Steps to Defend Taiwan* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2024), 4.

² On China’s so-called ‘Anaconda Strategy’, see Cheng-liang Chen and William Hetherington, “Think Tank Warns Taiwan about ‘Anaconda Strategy,’” *Taipei Times*, August 26, 2024. On Chinese gray zone provocations, see Raymond Kuo, *Contests of Initiative: Countering China’s Gray Zone Strategy in the East and South China Seas* (Washington, D.C.: Westphalia Press, 2020), 2 and Ivan Kanapathy, “Countering China’s Gray Zone Activities,” in Matt Pottinger ed., *The Boiling Moat: Urgent Steps to Defend Taiwan* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2024), 105-127.

³ For an expanded version of this argument, see Michael A. Hunzeker, “Statement before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission: Hearing on Deterring PRC Aggression Toward Taiwan,” February 18, 2021, 2-4.

⁴ Caitlin Campbell, *Taiwan: Defense and Military Issues* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2024), 1.

⁵ Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan), “President Tsai Announces Military Force Realignment Plan,” December 27, 2022.

⁶ For a useful summary of US FMS to Taiwan, see Eric Gomez and Benjamin Giltner, “Taiwan Arms Backlog, August 2024 Update,” CATO Institute, <https://www.cato.org/blog/taiwan-arms-backlog-august-2024-update>.

⁷ Kevin Chen, “Taiwan’s Defense Innovation Task Force Developing Deterrent Capabilities,” *Taiwan News*, October 3, 2024.

⁸ Focus Taiwan, “First Civilian Defense Chief in a Decade, Wellington Koo Faces Reform Challenge,” *CNA English News*, May 15, 2024.

⁹ Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan), “President Lai Presides over First Meeting of Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee,” September 26, 2024.

¹⁰ Staff Writer, “Most Willing to Defend Taiwan: Survey,” *Taipei Times*, October 10, 2024.

¹¹ This section summarizes arguments made in Michael A. Hunzeker, Enoch Wu, and Kobi Marom, “A New Military Culture for Taiwan,” in Matt Pottinger ed., *The Boiling Moat: Urgent Steps to Defend Taiwan* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2024), 61-82.

¹² Stephen P. Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 6.

¹³ For more details on the FMS backlog, see Eric Gomez and Benjamin Giltner, “Taiwan Arms Backlog, August 2024 Update,” CATO Institute, <https://www.cato.org/blog/taiwan-arms-backlog-august-2024-update>.

¹⁴ Drew Thompson, “Hope on the Horizon: Taiwan’s Radical New Defense Concept,” *War on the Rocks*, October 2, 2019; Michael A. Hunzeker, “Taiwan’s Defense Plans Are Going Off the Rails,” *War on the Rocks*, November 18, 2021.

¹⁵ The next administration’s tolerance for risk should drive the total number of trainers

¹⁶ The stakes are such that the U.S. Department of Defense should set aside one or more of its reserve bases for the exclusive purpose of giving Taiwanese units with a place to conduct live-fire and maneuver training