

Taiwan

Taiwan counts on military conscription reform to deter China invasion

Plan to extend compulsory training falls short of what is needed, experts warn



Military experts said Taiwan's move to extend military conscription is little more than an emergency measure, and will not address broader strategic shortfalls © Annabelle Chih/Getty Images

Kathrin Hille in Taipei YESTERDAY

A low-key US military delegation arrived in Taiwan last month to assess its army, navy and air force and explore what the country's armed services could gain from closer co-operation with Washington.

The visit's aims were the same as Taipei's high-profile announcement last week that it was lengthening conscription: to strengthen Taiwan's defences enough to deter China from attempting an invasion.

The People's Republic of China, which claims Taiwan as part of its territory, has threatened to use force to bring the island under its control since the ruling Chinese Communist party's Nationalist civil war adversaries fled there in 1949. But only over the past few years has that threat become a real concern for Taiwan and the US, the guarantor of its security.

"Not only has the People's Liberation Army a lot more advanced weapons, [but] we also see them single-mindedly focused on acquiring all the skills they need to take Taiwan," said a US official in Asia. "In that situation, if you are Taiwan, you have to face up to it and get ready fast."

China's more than two-decade push to build armed forces capable of realising its

national ambitions has left [Taiwan](#)'s military dangerously outgunned. Beijing spent \$270bn on its military in 2021, more than 21 times more than Taipei, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, a non-profit conflict research organisation.

The PLA has used that spending spree to assemble a naval fleet that now outnumbered that of the US, field new fighter jets at increasing speed and develop missiles that aim to put US air force bases in the Pacific and even large warships at risk.

As alarm grows over the increasing frequency, scope and sophistication of the PLA's operations near Taiwan and Beijing's more belligerent tone, Taiwan's president Tsai Ing-wen has devoted much more attention and resources to defence than any of her predecessors.

Russia's war in Ukraine has been an additional catalyst for long-delayed military reforms. On Tuesday, Tsai announced plans to resurrect [year-long mandatory military service](#) for men from 2024, a decade after a previous government slashed conscription to an almost meaningless four months, as well as boosting conscript pay and upgrading their training.



Taiwan's government has announced plans to upgrade its military training, but it still lags far behind China's PLA in strength and sophistication © Eyepress/Reuters

Yet military experts warned that the measures could fall far short of what is needed.

“They are basically going back to what was in place in 2008, before the force

reductions started,” said Kutsch Liao, military and cyber affairs consultant for Doublethink Lab, a Taipei-based civil society group. “While you have to give the president credit for reviving that system, they are not addressing the problem of military power, which is the core of deterrence.”

Military analysts said the conscription reform was little more than an emergency measure to end a chronic shortfall in military headcount, which an earlier attempted transition to an all-volunteer force could not achieve.

The defence ministry has pledged to implement an overhauled training regimen, including dropping bayonet training — ridiculed by many conscripts as useless and a symbol of the weak state of the force. Instead, young recruits will be put through modern US-designed modules, including for weapons such as Stinger or Javelin missiles.

But the new programme was initially devised for Taiwan’s nominally large if almost entirely dysfunctional reserve force. Foreign observers and local defence experts also expressed concerns that the sudden inflow of conscripts would result in severe training bottlenecks.

“How are you going to ensure all that if you suddenly get that many more people coming through?” Liao said. “That raises concerns that people will again have to wait many months until it’s their turn.”

Apart from whether Tsai’s government can deliver its ambitious reform plans, military experts have also warned that much [bigger strategic issues remain unsolved](#).

“I have long urged them to build a territorial defence force, a force which could operate as an urban guerrilla under a more decentralised command, but it is very clear from this plan that they do not want to adopt that concept,” said Admiral Lee Hsi-ming, former chief of the general staff of Taiwan’s armed forces. “This also means that they are not embracing the example of Ukraine or the Baltic states.”

Under Lee’s “Overall Defense Concept”, Taiwan’s military would have adopted an asymmetric strategy, abandoning keeping up with China in air or naval power and focusing instead on building capabilities that could exploit the weaknesses of an invading force, such as guerrilla warfare. But after Lee retired in July 2019, the concept was watered down.

“Our armed forces now continue to operate with traditional warfighting concepts and without clearly communicating a new strategy to the public,” said another retired general

general.

The US delegation observed a similar problem, according to people familiar with the matter. “They saw that our military is proficient on the tactical level, but lacks strategic thinking capabilities,” said one person briefed on the matter.

Insiders argued Taipei was on the right track, however late. “Tsai has made the difficult and big move to tell the public things need to change and an all-of-society effort is needed to defend their homeland,” said the US official. “There will be more progress from here.”

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