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By: John Dotson

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Among the many complex issues affecting Taiwan's defense reforms—including [controversies over weapons procurement](#) and the relative prioritization of [contesting "gray zone" operations versus preparing for a full-scale invasion](#)—one of the most contentious has been the management of the military's reserve forces and the ways in which this connects to conscripted military service. Compulsory military service has [long been unpopular](#) in Taiwan, and a series of measures implemented in the 2010s saw [service times reduced](#): first, from two years' universal male military service down to a year, and then from a year down to four months. However, changes have been afoot. Over the past two years, the Republic of China (ROC, 中華民國) Ministry of National Defense (MND, 國防部) has either implemented, or floated proposals for, a [range of measures](#) intended to beef up the quality and capacity of the ROC military's reserve components.

Controversies and Policy Debates Surrounding Conscription and Reserve Forces

The shorter period of four months for compulsory military service became a particular target of widespread derision as a "summer camp" experience that was [lacking in any meaningful training](#) for most recruits. Once this term of service was performed, reservists were only required to perform five to seven days of refresher training on alternate years—with the refresher training itself broadly criticized as inadequate, and deferments widely available. This lack of a rigorous conscription and reserve force management program further contributed to harsh commentary among both domestic and foreign critics that Taiwan was [not serious about its own defense](#).

A bureaucratic reorganization for the reserve forces was enacted on January 1, 2022, when the MND combined two legacy organizations to create the ["Armed Forces Reserve Command – All-Out Defense Mobilization Agency"](#) (全民防衛動員署後備指揮部). The new consolidated agency was charged with

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comprehensive management of “planning for mobilization, management, service, civil defense, [and] building reserve capacity” (主要任務為策劃執行動員、管理、服務、民防工作、建立後備潛力). Other noteworthy measures included the spring 2022 introduction of a [pilot program to increase training time](#) for selected reservists, as well as publicity efforts to [promote the role of reservists](#) in the 2022 iteration of the annual *Han Kuang* (漢光) military exercise.

Alongside such initiatives, there have been repeated discussions over the past year regarding the most important, and most controversial, measure of them all: an increase in the mandatory service time for conscripted troops. [Public opinion polling](#) in Taiwan conducted in the immediate wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine indicated a substantial jump in support for increasing the term of compulsory service. Trial balloon announcements regarding this prospect emerged in earnest in March 2022, when a series of senior ROC government officials—including Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng (邱國正) and Interior Minister Hsu Kuo-yung (徐國勇)—made [public comments supportive of an increase in service time](#).

Despite this, the potential expansion of conscripted service has remained a complex issue, in both practical and political terms. Questions have inevitably been raised regarding the [capacity of the ROC military](#) to adequately train and effectively incorporate a sudden large influx of new recruits, as well as questions regarding the financial costs of doing so. The increase in conscripted service time also remained a politically fraught issue for the administration of Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), particularly due to fears of potentially alienating the youth vote for Tsai’s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨). However, once past the [“nine-in-one” local elections](#) in November, the Tsai Administration possibly saw greater political room to maneuver on this controversial initiative.

The New Plan to Enhance Conscripted Military Service

Dramatic changes to the existing system for conscription were announced just before the end of the year as a key component of the [“Strengthening All-People’s Defense Military Force Restructuring Plan”](#) (強化全民國防兵力結構調整方案, called the “Military Force Realignment Plan” in the government’s own English-language communications). President Tsai formally announced the new policies in an official [speech delivered on December 27](#) from the presidential office. By way of introducing the new plan, Tsai referenced both the increasing threats to Taiwan, as well as the need for greater public commitment to Taiwan’s defense:

“Taiwan stands on the frontlines of authoritarian expansion, at the vanguard of the global defense of democracy. Only by preparing for war can we avoid it [...] Only by strengthening our self-defense capabilities can Taiwan more effectively protect our national security and interests while garnering further international support. The better prepared we are, the smaller the chance of adventurism from across the strait [...] peace depends on national defense, and national defense depends on the people of Taiwan.”



Image: President Tsai Ing-wen delivering a speech on December 27, in which she formally announced the “Military Force Restructuring Plan” for Taiwan’s armed forces. The plan includes an increase in the term of universal conscripted military service for young men to one year. (Image source: [ROC Presidential Office](#))

Increasing Service Time and Reorganizing Service Roles

As detailed in both [Tsai’s speech](#) and [publicity materials from the Executive Yuan](#) (行政院), the core feature of the plan is a provision to increase the term of conscripted military service: from the current requirement of four months to a full year. The new program will go into effect in 2024, and will apply to able-bodied males born on or after January 1, 2005. Another key feature of the plan is the concept of dividing military duties among four broad categories, as follows:

- “Main Battle Troops” (主戰部隊): The volunteer personnel of the active-duty military (currently manned at 180,000, with an end goal of 210,000), who will bear the primary burden of any potential future front-line fighting.
- “Garrison Troops” (守備部隊): Comprised predominantly of conscripted (“mandatory service”) personnel, these soldiers will be oriented primarily towards infrastructure protection and territorial defense.
- “Civil Defense System” (民防系統): “Alternative service personnel” (presumably, to include those deferred from combat service due to medical, conscientious, or other reasons) will be integrated into a public-private partner-

ship system for disaster relief, medical services, and other aspects of civil defense; as well as for unspecified, but presumably logistical, military support operations.

- “Reserve System” (後備系統): A revamped system for military reservists, intended to “replenish our main battle force with retired volunteer soldiers, and our garrison force with former mandatory servicemembers.”

Improving Training and Conditions of Service

In her speech, Tsai also addressed the many criticisms related to the existing lack of rigorous training, stating with startling frankness that “I do know that many citizens feel their time in the military was wasted.” Accordingly, she vowed that:

“Future mandatory service training will refer to the training methods used in the United States and other advanced nations [...] training in the operation of new types of weapons will be expanded, along with realistic combat training courses, live-fire marksmanship drills, joint exercises, and even civil defense coordination. [...] [T]raining in the use of Stinger missiles, Javelin missiles, Kestrel rockets, drones, and other new types of weapons will be added in accordance with mission requirements to meet the needs of modern warfare.”

The plan also includes an announced [increase in pay for entry-level conscripted personnel](#), to a value of NTD \$26,307 (USD \$877) per month—not a huge sum, but still a substantial 400 percent increase from the current paltry rate of NTD \$6,510 (USD \$207) per month. [1] The announced framework also included other benefits, including the provision that the year of service time would be credited in future civil service pensions, and a vague promise that the Ministry of Education (MOE, 教育部) would study ways in which the “education[al] system can be more flexible in helping conscription-eligible men effectively use their time and transition into future careers.”

Conclusions

The new “Strengthening All-People’s Defense Military Force Restructuring Plan” announced in December 2022 represents a pivotal change for both the size and organization of the ROC Armed Forces. Doing away with the widely derided four-month period of military training, the new requirements will demand a significantly increased level of commitment from Taiwan society. This will most notably include the personal sacrifice made by the young men who will dedicate a year of their youth to military service, but also the future adjustments to be made by families, the educational system, and the job market. (Indeed,



Image: “Good Men Fight Together to Protect Our Home”—A government-produced promotional graphic about the new one-year conscription policy. The graphic lists the four broad categorizations of service for military personnel under the new plan: “main battle troops,” “garrison troops,” the “reserve system,” and the “civil defense system.” (Image source: [ROC Executive Yuan](#))

the “All-People’s Defense” part of the plan’s title, and the provisions pertaining to civil defense, acknowledge this fact.)

If implemented as announced, the plan’s quadripartite division of duties would retain the conventional force structure of the Taiwan military—albeit with a substantially greater role for the “garrison troops” and the “civil defense system.” This model thereby implicitly rejects the calls made by some defense commentators for a [volunteer defense militia](#) modeled on the “Territorial Defense Force” of Ukraine. It remains to be seen, however, how effectively the shorter-term “garrison troops” will be integrated into service alongside the active duty “main battle troops” of the ROC Army. It also remains unclear what future training commitments might look like for reservists, and to what extent employers and Taiwan society will adapt their expectations in the face of such increased commitments.

Many critics will no doubt say—with solid justifications—that the new plan for enhanced conscripted service still remains inadequate in the face of the rising military threat posed to Taiwan by the Chinese military and Beijing’s irredentist ambitions. However, the new plan should be recognized as a substantial and positive component of Taiwan’s broader defense reforms, as well as a major change for Taiwan society. It also represents a significant expenditure of political capital on the part of the Tsai Administration, and stands alongside other measures—such as [substantial increases to the defense budget](#)—that demonstrate the ruling DPP is making a serious effort to boost Taiwan’s overall defense capacity. Much more remains to be done, but the new “Military Force Restructuring Plan” is a major step forward.

The main point: A new plan unveiled by Taiwan’s government in late December indicated intent to increase conscripted military service for young men to one year, beginning in January 2024. The new plan also laid out a broad framework for how these conscripted personnel would be used as “garrison troops” for territorial defense. The new plan represents a major change for Taiwan society and will significantly increase the trained manpower available to the ROC military.

[1] Specifically, in terms of compensation, the plan will provide NTD \$20,320 (USD \$ 677) per month in pay, and NTD \$5,987 (USD \$200) worth of benefits as insurance and meal stipends, for a total value of NTD \$26,307 (USD \$ 877).

Deterrence and Military Strategy in the Indo-Pacific: Time to Revitalize Strategic and Operational Concepts

By: Lt. Gen. (USMC, ret.) Wallace ‘Chip’ Gregson

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After an eventful December and January, the [defense and security policies of the United States and Japan are being upgraded](#), and look to be solidly set for the pacing threats of the era. In December, Japan formally published its new [National Security Strategy](#). It was accompanied by a new [National Defense Strategy](#) and an ambitious Mid-Term Defense Buildup Program (now called the Defense Buildup Program, or DBP). These documents explain in detail plans for a major defense budget increase—the start of a process to bring Japan up to the NATO standard, which calls for a commitment of two percent of gross domestic product to defense. This program will represent a doubling of Japan’s resource commitment to defense in the next five years. Consequently, the security and defense policies—and budgets—are now in a much better place for the United States, Japan, and Taiwan—but there is still more work to be done.

The Enhancement of the US-Japan Defense Posture in the Pacific Region

January became known as “Japanuary” in Washington, reflecting the extraordinary number of Japanese visitors for policy and strategy discussions. It was capped by the latest [“2+2” meeting](#) of the defense and foreign policy secretaries and ministers of

each country, ratifying the work done by their subordinates over the past year. A [summit meeting](#) between Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and President Joseph Biden provided the capstone to an extraordinary month (and year) for the Japan-US alliance.

Japan will [chair the meeting of the G7](#) this year, and host the G7 Summit in Hiroshima from May 19 to 21. In preparation, Prime Minister Kishida has [visited France, Italy, Great Britain, and Canada](#) prior to the summit meeting, marking Japan as a policy leader and active manager of global crises.

Other allies’ and like-minded countries’ security and defense policies—and budgets—will be similarly affected, but this discussion will focus on Japan, Taiwan, and the United States. With strong policies set, the armed forces of these countries are obligated to develop and implement strategies and operational concepts to support the new policies. Just as policies have changed to meet current and emerging challenges, now the armed services must meet the same challenge.



Image: Japanese Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada (left), Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi (center left), US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken (center right), and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin (right) appear for a joint press statement at the Security Consultative Talks (or “2+2 Talks”) in Washington, DC on January 11, 2023. (Image source: [US Department of Defense](#))

The Need for a Shift in Military Strategy

Our doctrines and practices of the past must be critically examined to meet the massive changes wrought by force development and expansion in Russia and China, as well as other states of concern, including North Korea. The US “baby boomer” generation grew up in the Cold War with the assumed birthright of unchallenged air and sea superiority throughout the world: we could sail where we wished and project power ashore at will. That freedom of maneuver is now gone. Challenges abound, from land-based missile systems and China’s rapidly expanding People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).

However, our own command structures and force postures are essentially unaltered.

Not all of the “old ways” will disappear. Hand-to-hand combat, dating back to the description in the Book of Genesis of Cain slaying Abel, is still with us in the modern world. As described long ago by the famous Prussian theorist [Carl Von Clausewitz](#):

“[C]onflict and war will retain its goal of the destruction of enemy forces, whether by death, injury, or any other means—either completely or enough to make him stop fighting. The complete or partial destruction of the enemy must be regarded as the sole object of all engagements. Direct annihilation of the enemy’s forces must always be the dominant consideration.”

In modern warfare, civilians and civil infrastructure are not spared: they remain primary targets to compel surrender. It has always been so. Look no further than today’s war over Ukraine. However, the previous status quo is gone. Today’s threats are compounded by new capabilities, drawn from the profound effects of advancing technologies that enhance expanding force structures. To cite just a few:

- pervasive surveillance coupled with guided weapons accurate at distance;
- autonomous (or uncrewed) systems in the air, on land, at sea, and undersea, as well as in the space domain;
- artificial intelligence applied to data analysis; and
- information warfare in its various manifestations.

Change is difficult for any large organization, be it governmental, civil, naval, or military. But it must be done. Adapting and prevailing will require bold leadership and hard work.

This is not an argument against “jointness,” as understood in the United States. Armed services exist, or are brought into existence as recently shown with the newly created [Space Force](#), to meet challenges in their respective domains. The art of “jointness” is the adroit combination and management of various service competencies in support of deterrence, and in [military campaigns](#) as necessary.

In the US system, the individual services are charged in [Title 10 of the United States Code](#) with “providing forces trained and equipped” as required to support national policy. This is where requirements and budgets must be balanced. Therefore, the various services must make a compelling case to the Congress and the people of the United States for their support. As with

your family budget, a number of competing, seemingly limitless demands must be considered within the available budget. If “strategy” consists of balancing ends, ways, and means, it follows that the budget is the clearest statement of our strategy. This is where limited resources are devoted to selected requirements. This is difficult in the best of times, and exponentially harder in eras of rapid and destabilizing change.

The Need for a “Strategic Concept” for Naval and Other Forces

Fortunately, we have some history to guide us. The emergence of the atomic (and later, nuclear) era in the 1940s brought into question the roles, missions, and the very existence of forces as previously understood. We created the Department of Defense, and slashed service budgets while undergoing a rapid demobilization. Geopolitical tectonic plates moved, as the Soviet Union went from ally to enemy, subverted several Eastern European countries, blockaded East Berlin, and exploded its own atomic device. The China we knew as a World War II ally became an enemy following Mao Zedong’s (毛澤東) successful Communist revolution.

The early Cold War was a highly charged political and military time, which involved both inter-service rivalries and disputes over budgetary priorities. Comments made then (which would not be out of place today) reflected those clashes, in the armed forces equivalent of trash talk. As reportedly said by a [US Army Air Corps general](#) in 1946:

“You, the Navy, are not going to have anything but a couple of carriers which are ineffective anyway, and they will probably be sunk in the first battle. Now, as for the Marines [...] a small, bitched-up army talking Navy lingo. We are going to put those Marines in the Regular Army and make efficient soldiers out of them [...] The Navy is going to end up only supplying the requirements of the Army Air and the Ground Forces...”

A young political scientist, [Samuel P. Huntington](#), took to the pages of the *US Naval Institute Proceedings* in its [May 1954 issue](#) to explain the Navy’s problem, and to point the way to a solution. His simple conception was that the fundamental purpose of a military service lay in its role in implementing national policy: its overall *strategic concept*. Huntington identified three core elements of this:

1. the *resources*, human and material, necessary to implement that concept;
2. the *public support* necessary to secure those resources,

requiring a well-defined and compelling strategic concept; and

3. an *organizational structure* that can readily take those resources and apply them efficiently and effectively to the concept.

The US Navy apparently heeded this advice, and overcame the fact and perception of conflicting and confusing goals. It did not happen instantly. [The “Maritime Strategy” of the 1980s](#), begun in the 1970s when resources were strained, provided a compelling *strategic concept*, and garnered substantial resources to support it. In this same era, the Army brought forward [“Air Land Battle.”](#) The US Air Force and NATO produced the [“Follow On Forces Attack” doctrine](#) to similar deterrent success for NATO.

It is hardly too early for the United States, Japan, and Taiwan, both singularly and together, to develop new strategic concepts to meet today’s challenges. A simple place to start could be to list the changes in technology on the left side of a paper or screen, and the results on the right side: e.g., satellites mean seeing more targets, weapons accurate at distance mean hitting more targets, etc. The catch is that these “seeing and hitting” advantages accrue to the enemy, as well—and our forces are also within range now. There is a long list of things to be done.

Whither “Asymmetry” in Indo-Pacific Defense Reforms?

Working out what to do about all this is where the conversation will get exciting. If this sounds simplistic, throughout history effective doctrinal change has been honored more in the breach than the observance. The French determined that their loss in the [Franco-Prussian War of 1870](#) was due to a lack of offensive spirit and doctrine. In response, they made relentless attack a doctrinal principle. In the meantime, technology brought forward a number of capabilities, such as mass production, standardized artillery calibers, machine guns, and barbed wire that made the battlefield deadly for maneuver. These advancements contributed to the slaughter in the trench warfare of World War I, which nearly ruined Europe.

The result of that tragic experience was a doctrine concentrated on fixed defensive positions. The magnificent Maginot Line stood as the premier example of this. But maneuver came back with a vengeance in Germany’s interwar army and air force, thanks to efficient internal combustion engines, the maturing of aviation, wireless communications, and other technologies. Rapid maneuver outflanked fixed fortifications, and disaster ensued again. Beware of permanent conclusions, and continually question them.

A final note for this concept development process has to do with the often-abused concept of “asymmetry”—a term invoked repeatedly in discussions surrounding Taiwan’s defense posture, in particular. Weapons are not inherently either “symmetric” or “asymmetric”—it all depends on how they are used, which in turn depends on well-crafted operational concepts. Forces exist in the space, land, air, sea, and undersea domains. (Cyber, for its part, is a special case that seems to be everywhere.) These forces exist in one of four aspects. First is production, where manufacturing, recruiting, training and such take place. Then there are logistics concerns: fixing, fueling, supplying, etc. Third is operations, or the movement of forces to combat. Finally comes tactics, where the gathering of intelligence, tactical maneuvers, and shooting takes place.

Symmetry is easy to describe. It is where airplanes in the tactical aspect shoot at enemy airplanes in the tactical aspect. Similar dynamics occur with ships confronting ships, soldiers facing off against other soldiers, etc. Forces in the tactical aspect can also attack dissimilar forces in a different tactical mode (airplanes attacking ships, for example). This is straight-up combat, like ritual dueling at ten paces, or the jousting of knights on horseback with lances. It is often the costliest form of combat.

Asymmetry occurs when forces in the tactical aspect take on similar enemy forces still in the production, logistics, or operational aspects. This is where forces with the master arming switch on can attack forces not able to shoot back. Surprise attacks often seem to demonstrate this advantage, as with the German submarine that sank the battleship *HMS Royal Oak* in Scapa Flow port in 1939.

Active, fighting “shields” can and must be used to protect forces—and civilian populations—during those times when they are in one or more of the non-tactical situations (production, logistics, operations). One such example might be the use of the Royal Air Force against German bombers in the Battle of London. Another might be the escort ships safeguarding convoys of merchant ships delivering supplies, as in the Battle for Malta in the Mediterranean Sea from 1940-1942.

Today Japan, Taiwan, and the United States face the challenge of enhancing deterrence to maintain their safety and security near hostile powers. Strengthening deterrence under today’s and tomorrow’s threat conditions—and prevailing if deterrence fails—requires revitalized strategic and operational concepts and capabilities. That begins with solid planning and concept development.

The main point: Faced with a rapidly advancing China, it is im-

perative that the United States, Japan, and Taiwan work together to develop new military concepts in response to their evolving common challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. In doing so, they could significantly enhance their deterrent capabilities.

How Much Has President Tsai Benefited from Public Views of COVID-19 Policies, and What Are the Implications for 2024?

By: Timothy Rich

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Taiwan's initial handling of the COVID-19 pandemic garnered [considerable international attention](#), with President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) listed in 2020's *Bloomberg 50* as "[Taiwan's COVID Crusher](#)"—and others suggesting that Taiwan's pandemic policies could have implications for [relations with China](#). Taiwan's success has been attributed to various factors, including [cooperation](#) across levels of government and citizen groups, early and repetitive news coverage, [broad compliance](#) with social distancing and mask use, [cultural factors](#) prioritizing the collective good versus individualism, and [strong isolation and quarantine policies](#).

Yet, attention to Taiwan's early successes has consistently failed to acknowledge changing perceptions within the country, especially as Taiwan saw COVID-19 cases rise throughout 2022. By October 2022, when Taiwan lifted tourist restrictions, the [country had confirmed](#) over 7.5 million cases and 14,000 deaths, the majority within the calendar year. As the pandemic endured, one would expect public perceptions to also shift, especially as Taiwan approached local elections—with opposition parties having incentives to emphasize failures in pandemic policies. While research in [Canada](#) and [Western Europe](#) has found greater support for government, national leaders, and democratic institutions at the start of the pandemic, little research has tracked public support in Taiwan throughout the pandemic.

One would assume a continued—although perhaps smaller—spillover effect in Taiwan, where perceived successes in combating COVID-19 would boost views of President Tsai. However, it is less clear whether or not these factors simply reinforce the views of those already viewing Tsai more favorably. Moreover, even if

the public essentially rewards the president for perceived success regarding the pandemic, other policies would presumably also influence evaluations, thus making it difficult to determine to what extent the pandemic policies specifically are the cause of any evaluation bump. In other words, does satisfaction on COVID-19 policy, compared to other factors, disproportionately influence views of the incumbent president?

Controversies in Taiwan Regarding Government Counter-Pandemic Measures

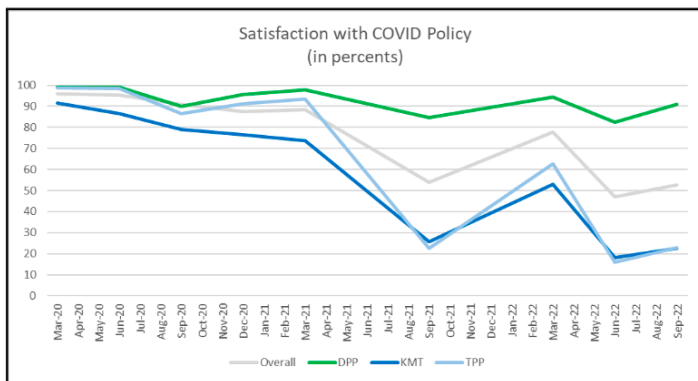
Early pandemic survey data in Taiwan showed [84 percent approval](#) of counter-COVID measures, while [Nakamura](#) and [Rich and Einhorn](#) linked the administration's COVID response to overall evaluations of President Tsai. However, later polling showed a more [mixed public response](#), perhaps in part due to the perceived social costs associated with the measures. The limited access to vaccines in early 2021 potentially [further strained](#) initial approval. Critics of the administration questioned its ability to import enough vaccines, especially after the Tsai government [refused Chinese-produced vaccines](#) in favor of promoting the domestically produced [Medigen vaccine](#). By the time of the Medigen vaccine rollout in August of 2021, [only 5 percent](#) of the population had received two doses. Additional criticism followed in 2022 as the administration loosened pandemic restrictions and saw cases spike—particularly after the arrival of the Omicron variant—with the administration ultimately [shifting away](#) from a zero-COVID policy.

A survey conducted by the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation (TPOF, 台灣民意基金會) in April 2022 found that [46.3 percent disapproved](#) of the policy, while 45 percent were supportive. Additionally, later surveys found support for [limiting entry](#). As Taiwan approached local elections in November 2022, opposition candidates emphasized perceived mishandlings of policy during the pandemic. For example, Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) legislators protested in the Legislative Yuan in September 2022, [demanding an apology](#) from the Tsai Administration for the opaqueness of vaccine purchases and the tally of over 10,000 pandemic deaths. Meanwhile, administration officials [denied claims of corruption](#) leading to increased costs for the procurement of vaccines.

Data from the Taiwan Election and Democratization Study

Overall, the assumption remains that views of COVID policy influence overall views of Tsai. To unpack views on COVID policy and evaluations of President Tsai among Taiwan's citizens, this article examines all nine waves of the Taiwan Election and Democratization Study ([TEDS](#)) national surveys that asked about

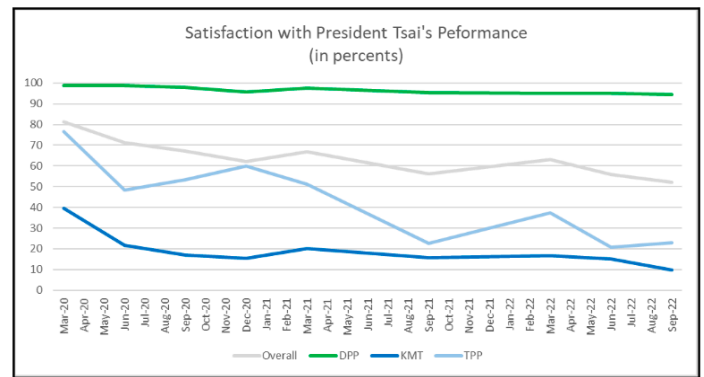
COVID policy (stretching from March 2020 through September 2022, the latter being the last one publicly released in 2022). The table below shows initial broad satisfaction, with 95.88 percent of respondents in March 2020 satisfied or very satisfied. Additionally, the surveys showed minimal partisan variance, as over 90 percent of supporters of the three largest parties displayed satisfaction. Support overall declined through the September 2021 survey to 53.95 percent and has vacillated since, with only a thin majority (52.55 percent) satisfied in September 2022. This decline over time is seen among all the partisan groups, with the smallest change among Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) supporters, declining only 8.19 percent; compared to 69.07 percent and 75.88 percent for KMT and Taiwan People's Party (TPP, 台灣民眾黨) supporters, respectively.



Graphic: Overall satisfaction with the Tsai Administration's COVID-19 policies among supporters of the DPP, the KMT, and the TPP. (Graphic source: [Taiwan Election and Democratization Study](#))

A cursory view also shows a decline in President Tsai's overall job performance and perceptions of trustworthiness. The figure below presents just those stating they were satisfied or very satisfied. Starting in March 2020, 81.18 percent of respondents overall claimed to be satisfied with Tsai's job performance, consistent with expectations regarding an initial rallying effect behind leadership during the pandemic. As expected, support peaked among DPP supporters in March 2020 (98.75 percent), though over three-quarters of TPP supporters were also satisfied (76.47 percent). By contrast, only 39.46 percent of KMT supporters were satisfied. Overall, satisfaction dropped by 29.74 percent over the time period under analysis, with the smallest decline among DPP supporters (4.27 percent), compared to supporters of the KMT (29.18 percent) or TPP (53.64 percent), all patterns consistent with expectations. Meanwhile, trust in Tsai, measured on a 0 to 10 scale, showed similar variation: with an average score of 6.67 in March 2020 declining to 5.18 in September 2022, with larger declines seen among KMT

and TPP supporters.



Graphic: Satisfaction with President Tsai's performance among supporters of the DPP, the KMT, and the TPP (Graphic source: [Taiwan Election and Democratization Study](#))

Regression analysis gives greater insight. Running models for each wave of the survey (as well as ones pooling the survey data), the results consistently show a positive and statistically significant correlation between satisfaction on COVID-19 policy and views on Tsai—even after controlling for party affiliation, views on other policies, and standard demographic factors (age, gender, education) and views on Taiwan's status and economy. However, this impact differs over time. For those satisfied with COVID-19 policies up through March 2021, this corresponded with a 5 to 12 percent increase in satisfaction with Tsai's performance, jumping to 34 percent in June and September 2022. However, satisfaction did not seem to have a consistently sized impact on trust in Tsai, corresponding with a 0.35 to 1.08 increase in trust rating. As expected, support for the DPP consistently corresponded with a statistically significant increase in evaluations. In contrast, while KMT and TPP supporters generally corresponded with lower evaluations, the relationship often was not statistically significant, while the size of the impact was consistently smaller than that for the DPP.

Models also compared the impact of satisfaction in COVID-19 policy on evaluations of Tsai to satisfaction in five other policy areas—cross-strait relations, diplomacy, national defense, economic growth, and people's livelihoods—as these five areas have been consistently shown to impact overall evaluations of Tsai. While all five factors consistently corresponded with statistically significant higher evaluations of Tsai, most of them consistently produced larger impacts on policy evaluations and trust of Tsai than COVID-19 policy. In other words, the evidence suggests that while COVID-19 policies did influence evaluations of the president, they did not trump traditional areas of importance.

Declining public perceptions of COVID may ultimately have an indirect impact on the 2024 national elections. President Tsai likely benefited from a “rally around the flag” effect at the start of the pandemic, and despite continued strong evaluations among DPP supporters, the DPP’s next candidate—even if that were to be current Vice President William Lai (賴清德)—will likely be unable to maintain this evaluation bump. Moreover, a focus on early COVID success not only may fail to resonate beyond those already inclined to vote for the DPP, but provides a greater opportunity for opposition candidates to emphasize perceived policy failures in the last year. In contrast, opposition candidates are unlikely to make COVID policy failures a focal point in campaign rhetoric, but will likely frame COVID policy as an example of ineffective leadership.

Conclusions

What does this tell us? Based on the TEDS data, the comparative success of the administration in COVID-19 policy—especially in the early days of the pandemic—appears to have improved evaluations of President Tsai, consistent with research on officials benefiting from crisis responses. While evaluations unsurprisingly remain strongest among DPP supporters and lower among opposition parties, partisan proclivities alone do not explain the linkage between pandemic policies and evaluations of Tsai. That these effects remain evident two years into the pandemic suggests acknowledgement of the administration’s efforts, while also demonstrating declining support for the government’s divisive [“coexist with COVID” policy](#).

In addition, this boost does not seem disproportionate to evaluations in other policy areas, providing greater context than aggregate satisfaction on pandemic policies would suggest. However, with increased outbreaks in the second half of 2022 and the DPP’s poor performance in November’s local elections, it is unclear whether a lame duck President Tsai will continue to receive a modest bump in evaluations going forward. Nor is it clear, in the absence of critical election rhetoric, whether views on COVID-19 policy may bounce back, as seen in [South Korea in 2020](#). Overall, the evidence suggests that COVID-19 policies, when popular, did not crowd out attention to traditional policy concerns—but, as seen elsewhere, increasingly were evaluated through partisan lenses.

The main point: While the Taiwan government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced overall perceptions of President Tsai Ing-wen’s performance, traditional issues like cross-strait relations and national defense remain more significant.

Combating Beijing’s Multifaceted Economic Coercion Strategy against Taiwan

By: Zoe Weaver-Lee

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When US and Taiwan officials [confirmed](#) the visit of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in late July 2022, a number of reactions from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) were expected. Yet, even two days prior to the Speaker’s visit, it was not People’s Liberation Army (PLA) military exercises or missile launches that kicked off China’s response, but rather sweeping [suspensions of imports](#) from hundreds of Taiwanese food producers. In addition to the obvious economic costs of these restrictions—some estimates indicate a loss of NTD \$620 million (around USD \$20 million, less than two percent of Taiwan’s [total agricultural exports to China](#) in 2020)—such developments are part of a longer history of China’s use of economic tools to meet political ends.

Taiwan has been at the receiving end of these tactics for quite some time, and has been the target of the PRC’s most severe and wide-ranging coercive measures. Prior to 2010, China’s use of economic tools to achieve its Taiwan policy goals depended on the strength of its economic leverage, which was more limited relative to its clout today. As a rapidly developing economy, however, China positioned itself as a promising destination for foreign investment, while also maintaining a strict position on its “One-China Principle.” Since its rise as an economic power, China has diversified its coercive methods to manipulate trade flows, use financial means to influence cultural exchange across the Taiwan Strait, lure Taiwan’s diplomatic partners, and create shifts in the cross-strait movement of private sector capital. As China’s economic coercion grows more diverse, so must Taiwan’s responses.

The Many Faces of China’s Economic Coercion

Given China’s important role in global supply chains, shipping, consumer markets, and manufacturing, trade manipulation is arguably the most powerful tool in its arsenal. Over the past three decades, the PRC has repeatedly employed its economic leverage as a coercive policy tool.

In 1992, for example, French firms were denied a bid to build the Guangzhou subway following Paris’ decision to sell jet fighters to Taiwan. [1] Meanwhile, China also leveraged its economic growth as a “like-minded” partner in global development proj-

ects, often aimed at Taiwan’s diplomatic partners in the Global South. One earlier example of this tactic was seen in 2004, when then-Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerritt of the Commonwealth of Dominica announced that his country would sever ties with Taiwan and establish relations with China following the PRC’s pledge to donate USD \$122 million in funds to rebuild a stadium, highways, and health facilities, as well as finance scholarships.

Citing inspection breaches, such as harmful pests or chemicals, China banned the import of several Taiwanese agricultural goods in 2022, including pineapples, sugar apples, wax apples, and grouper fish. While the banning of these goods may appear random at first glance, Beijing targeted these specific imports because of their reliance on China as the main overseas market for export. Before the bans were put into place, China accounted for [91.2 percent](#) of the total exported pineapples from Taiwan, [97 percent](#) of sugar apple exports, [98 percent](#) of wax apple exports, and [90 percent](#) of grouper exports. Additionally, days prior to the visit of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan, China [enacted bans](#) on thousands of additional Taiwanese agricultural products, including citrus fruit and certain types of fish. While the policy will not necessarily cause a significant economic dent, it sent a clear message.



Image: Taiwanese grouper fish from Pingtung County packaged for sale (undated). PRC authorities declared a sudden import ban on Taiwan-harvested grouper fish in June 2022, claiming that drug residues had been found in fish samples from Taiwan.

(Image source: [ROC Overseas Community Affairs Council](#))

China has not only used this signaling strategy toward Taiwan, but has also used it against Taiwan’s international supporters, such as Lithuania. Following Lithuania’s bold stance to use the name “Taiwan” when titling the Taiwan representative office

in Vilnius, Beijing announced an [imposition of sanctions](#) that took the form of denied import permits and pest management citations. In February 2022, following a series of friendly exchanges—including Lithuania’s [donations of vaccines](#) to Taiwan that subsequently garnered [immense public support](#)—China banned the import of Lithuanian [dairy products, beef, and beer](#), claiming documentation issues.

At the corporate level, Chinese state-owned enterprises have also been vectors of economic coercion. Tactics within this arena usually aim at draining Taiwan’s educated workforce, infiltrating its private sector (for the purposes of property theft, propaganda disbursement, and financial leverage), and diminishing Taiwan’s own business prospects. Even Jack Ma (馬雲), once China’s richest e-commerce magnate, announced a [Taiwanese-focused fund](#) for entrepreneurs in 2015. The trend has since been encouraged by CCP policy, which includes a growing list of [several dozen government incentives](#) intended to attract high-tech companies, academics, and entrepreneurs. While the causes of Taiwan’s brain drain are complex and cannot entirely be attributed to the [strategies employed by China](#), it is clear that Beijing views this as an opportunity for exploitation. As of April 2021, Taipei has implemented policies to combat this issue, such as [requiring staffing companies](#) to remove all listings for jobs in China and [employing its own incentives](#) for tech talent.

While China has employed various mechanisms to diplomatically isolate Taiwan and [exclude it](#) from international organizations, it has not shied away from utilizing its deep pockets to sway Taiwan’s diplomatic partners. In 2018, it was reported that the Dominican Republic’s diplomatic shift from Taiwan to China was financially influenced by the PRC. Beijing’s [investment package](#)—to the tune of USD \$3.1 billion—included plans for a new freeway, infrastructure projects, and a natural gas power plant. In addition to investments and lending, the PRC has also utilized the sheer size of its market as leverage against Taiwan’s diplomatic allies. As Palauan President Surangel Whipps Jr. described in an interview for the Global Taiwan Institute’s [Taiwan Security Review](#) podcast, Beijing directed tourism away from Palau following its warming relations with Taiwan: “[B]ecause of our relationship with Taiwan, suddenly, those tourists were shut off. Marketing in China stopped.” More recently, Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA, 中華民國外交部) [expressed concern](#) that Honduras may be heading toward a similar fate: specifically, a meeting between Honduran Foreign Minister Enrique Reina and PRC Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Xie Feng (謝鋒) in January 2023 supposedly included talks of China’s “potential involvement in the construction of a hydroelectric dam in Honduras.”

Lastly, in an effort to shape the international narrative of Taiwan through culture, China has used economic coercion to co-opt, ban, and influence key cultural figures. Recently, Taiwanese music artists Ouyang Nana (歐陽娜娜) and Angela Chang (張韶涵), [who both performed](#) for China's televised National Day program in 2020 and were [later featured](#) in an advertisement promoting cross-Straits unification, were fiercely criticized on Taiwanese social media and even faced fines of up to USD \$17,000. Ouyang's popularity in China—having performed [116 concerts over 10 years](#)—has brought about [significant financial success](#). Chang, similarly, found [more success](#) in China's music industry than in her earlier career years in Taiwan.

Additionally, the mere risk of losing financial opportunities in China is often enough to incentivize pro-Beijing stances in entertainment. For example, American actor and professional wrestler John Cena [issued an apology](#) to the people of China on social media for using the term “country” to describe Taiwan during a promotional campaign for his film *Fast and Furious 9*. [2] The same boycotting mechanism has also been used to sever Taiwan celebrities' brand deals and endorsements from China, including the Taiwanese television host Dee Hsu (Xiao 'S,' 徐熙娣)—who, after publicly supporting Taiwan's Olympic athletes, [lost endorsements](#) from Shanghai-based Shou Quan Zhai and others.

Developing a Multi-Faceted Approach to China's Economic Coercion

There are several steps that can be taken by Taiwan, the United States, and the international community to mitigate the risks posed by China's economic coercion:

- I. Add cushion to Taiwan's economy and supply chains through bilateral and regional trade agreements, building ties with other [targets of Chinese coercion](#), and encouraging Taiwan's participation in international organizations.

Considering the threat of Taiwan's dependence on China as a market, giving Taiwan the space to reduce this dependence should be a priority. These efforts should include [working toward](#) a US-Taiwan free trade agreement (FTA), continuing progress toward [Taiwan's inclusion in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership \(CPTPP\)](#), and further developing its bilateral and regional trade agreements. Using [pre-existing platforms](#), the United States should work to overcome current trade disputes so as to strengthen Taiwan's position as an alternative to China as a trading partner when possible. Taiwan's focus on its [New Southbound Policy](#) (NSP, 新南向政策) will be essential in that regard. Of course, several

legal questions must be answered before this goal is realized, but such developments would allow Taiwan to focus on building partnerships rather than competing for the international market's attention.

Perhaps the most contentious measure to achieve such goals would be to work toward greater accountability at the corporate level. While it may eventually be necessary to tackle this issue using regulations, incentives could be a vital feature in lessening economic dependence on China, thus reducing the impact of its coercive measures in the meantime. This, of course, will have to take several industry-specific forms. Overall, a continuation of [tax incentives](#) for manufacturing on US soil, investments in automation technologies, and [education on Chinese intellectual property theft](#) are all necessary for any industry with ventures in China. Additionally, grants for the entertainment industry to produce content without fear of Chinese retribution, both in the United States and in Taiwan, would provide a buffer to China's control of the entertainment industry.

Similar to the space provided to Taiwan to lessen its dependence on China, other nations that have been pulled into its orbit must also have such economic security. The United States and Taiwan should fulfill their promises to provide valuable economic assistance and partnerships to countries seeking to sever ties with China. Additionally, Taiwan's official development assistance (ODA) strategy should [focus](#) on implementing long-term, non-predatory programs with non-allies to build relationships built on mutual, sustainable support.

The international community's investment in Taiwan's sovereignty is also partially dependent on its perceived value to international organizations. While it is undeniable that Taiwan has been largely successful in the fields of public health, democratic development, technological innovation, and human rights, its official participation or observership status in the UN system will be a key step in its recognition as a valuable alternative to the PRC.

- II. Ensure Taiwan's economic strength from the inside out.

Taiwan should focus on developing employment schemes that bring educated Taiwanese back to Taiwan. China's manipulation of Taiwan's brain drain poses a danger to the future of its educated workforce, which is becoming increasingly intertwined with the Chinese economy. It is thus important to provide incentives and employment initiatives in an effort to bring educated Taiwanese back to Taiwan.

- III. Diversify Taiwan's role in the global supply chain.

In addition, the Taiwan government should focus on diversifying its role in the supply chain—particularly in the semiconductor industry. Not only does its [over-emphasis on manufacturing](#) pose a risk to its natural resources and its ability to respond to economic shocks, but it also simplifies Taiwan’s job market. In relation to the previous recommendation, educated Taiwanese have the ability to play a role along the supply chain, be it through research and development or logistics, and should also be guaranteed competitive wages to do so.

As exemplified by the cases above, China’s implementation of an economic coercion strategy to exert its foreign policy goals—namely, the isolation and subjugation of Taiwan—is diverse in scope as well as effectiveness. Due to its sheer economic might, China has been able to tug diplomatic strings, build economic dependence, manipulate flows of tourism, and control entertainment industries. Due to the multifaceted nature of China’s strategy, a comprehensive response would have to include both corporate and governmental entities, as well as bilateral and multilateral partnerships.

The main point: China’s economic coercion of Taiwan has diversified in scope in the past few years. Due to the nature of this evolving threat, Taiwan and its partners must develop comprehensive measures to respond to such tactics in all forms.

[1] David M. Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money, and Minds* (University of California Press), 2008: 67.

[2] This installment in the film franchise has generated [USD \\$135 million](#) at the Chinese box office alone, a market widely acknowledged by [Hollywood as a whole](#).