



**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH & REVIEWS**

journal homepage: www.ijmrr.online/index.php/home

MILITARIZATION IN TAIWAN: TRENDS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Dr. David Pendery

Associate Professor, Department of Applied Foreign Languages, National Taipei University of Business, No. 321, Sec. 1, Jinan Rd., Zhongzheng District, Taipei City 100, Taiwan

How to Cite the Article: *Pendery, D. (2024). Militarization In Taiwan: Trends And Transformations. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews, Vol 03, No. 02, pp. 87-95.*

Keywords

*Militarization,
Taiwan government,
Military affairs,
Soldiers, Taiwan
citizens*

Abstract

This paper examines militarization issues in Taiwan from positive and negative standpoints. I view militarization in the first sense simply as “the action or practice of equipping or providing a nation with soldiers and other military resources. The action or course of giving something a military character.” Related to this is militarism in the strict sense, “the belief or the desire of a government or citizens that a state should sustain a robust military ability and to use it aggressively to expand national interests and values.” Some have written that militarization theory has its roots in the conception of militarism, proper, which has to do with the veneration of the military and war as a value. This definition, including “militarism,” extends the view of just where “militarization” can lead into unexplored areas of attitude, belief and value. These social/military moves can have both positive and negative consequences.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Militarization

Whether Taiwan is undergoing militarization, in either positive or negative aspects, is I think not doubted by many people, both Taiwanese and foreign. To begin, I view militarization in the first sense simply in a dictionary definition, “the action or process of equipping or



supplying a place, organization, etc. with soldiers and other military resources. The action or process of giving something a military character” (*Oxford Learner’s Dictionary*). Related to this is militarism proper, “the belief or the desire of a government or a people that a state should maintain a strong military capability and to use it aggressively to expand national interests and/or values” (*Wikipedia*). Julian Schofield extends this view when he writes that, “Militarization theory has its origins in the concept of militarism, which had to do with the glorification of the military and war as a value, and how this was represented aesthetically and socially within...society” (1). This definition including “militarism,” extends the understanding of just where “militarization” can lead, that is, into uncharted areas of attitude, belief and value. As noted, these military moves with their strong social consequences and outcomes can have both positive and negative consequences.

I have stated that I believe that Taiwan is undergoing a broad and deep process of militarization, but many people would say “So what? Every other country is doing the same.” And to be sure this true. The United States, China, Germany, France, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia all have ample military expenditures, they are all, in a word, “militarizing,” and there is a “tendency to regard military efficiency as the paramount interest of the state” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Preparing one’s military is seen as a norm, a right, and a safe and sound way to prepare the nation for any major martial problems that might arise, which needless to say can happen almost anytime, anywhere. As well, there is the simple reality that a military power will be treated with respect, deference, and a bit of admiration in the world. Taiwan’s military budget comes in at almost \$20 billion annually, and without question the nation’s populace largely sees this as a necessity, given China’s militaristic behavior in and around Taiwan (we will see this further in Taiwan citizen comments below). One could say that my own somewhat negative view of militarization is undermined by these facts. China has been threatening Taiwan in open ways, not least since the country has taken on expanded connections and visitations with both its formal allies, and also any number of other democratic countries and major powers around the world. China has openly adopted U.S. military doctrine in terms of power projection and full spectrum and joint operations—military flyovers across the Taiwan Air Defense Identification Zone; naval activity quite near the coast of Taiwan with live-fire drills; planning for rapid-reaction combat and amphibious assault missions; the “Joint Sword”

operation, which focused on a Taiwan blockade and an assault employing varied avenues of attack; focused efforts on the Bashi Channel separating the Philippines and Taiwan, considered a key choke point that would limit U.S. support of Taiwan; the presence of Chinese coast guard vessels around the island; the thousands of missiles in China targeting Taiwan at this moment—I could go on.

Within all of the above, prominent commentators have expressed that “Chinese leader Xi Jinping says he is preparing for war” (Pomfret). At the annual meeting of China’s parliament in March, “Xi wove the theme of war readiness through four separate speeches, in one instance telling his generals to ‘dare to fight’” (Pomfret) His government also “announced a 7.2 percent increase in China’s defense budget, which has doubled over the last decade” (Pomfret). As well, Beijing has launched new military readiness laws, new air-raid shelters in cities, at least one wartime emergency hospital, and altered laws governing military reservists. China’s own militarization, certainly far beyond anything Taiwan could ever muster, is in full swing.

2. TAIWAN’S MILITARIZATION

The AND SO, THE ABOVE GIVES THE BIG PICTURE OF WHAT IS GOING on internationally, and in Taiwan. The nation is militarizing, with the media in Taiwan very much playing a role in promoting militarization in Taiwan (I will not cite these sources here). Again, a lot of people will object to my views—as noted, virtually all of the Taiwanese public, politicians, and foreign commentators support the broad overall trend of militarization, and they see this as a basic right and necessity for Taiwan, the nation.

It has been asked, what does Taiwan gain here? Well, this does present to the world Taiwan’s overall relevance, competence and importance in terms of its role as a free, democratic state interacting with other such states in international contexts (“like-minded countries” as is often said); and you might say that the Taiwan defense industry quite likes the input and expected output from such claims (call it a “winner” in militarization). But perhaps the question again becomes, what are the consequences (particularly negative) of all of this?

3. THE CONSEQUENCES

I HAVE OBSERVED A NUMBER OF NEGATIVE POSSIBILITIES OF militarization. There is a trend in Taiwan about the conversion of civilians into soldiers, and “the importance

of Taiwan being strong internally from a defense standpoint” (Chin, italics added). These processes influence societies and cultures both overtly and imperceptibly, and they are often cloaked in miscommunication, faked-up data, and a belief in the “biological certainty” of war—“There is no ambiguity when it comes to war. Ambiguity begs for certainty and a lack thereof has historically led to war” (Dane). Read here the called-for switch in the U.S. from “strategic ambiguity” with China in the Taiwan Strait, to a policy of “strategic clarity,” that is, a forceful, blunt approach to China, “unambiguously signaling to the PRC clear red lines not to cross” (Malinconci).

Militarization in these ways promotes attitudes and expectations of innate violence and the legitimacy and inevitability of military conflict, in an attempt to accustom publics to militarism and war. In one final note, I pointed out that militarization programs are systems and visions of the state’s “moral universe”—what citizens think, believe, and feel—and they shape visions “which shape ideas about soldiering, killing, allegiance, human rights, conceptions of justice and law...political economy, and form the ‘justification’ for the use of military violence” (Bickford). We have seen just such attitudes arising in Taiwan. I won’t call the Taiwanese citizenry the “losers” in this game, but I think they may find themselves on the horns of a troublous social and developmental philosophy.

4. CITIZEN’S VIEW

WITH THE ABOVE SAID, I TURN TO BRIEF COMMENTS FROM A

A Taiwanese citizen. I wanted to ask this person what he feels about the impact of militarization, their values and attitudes in these lights. This comment is by Dr. Cheng-hao Yang (楊承豪) of National Taipei University of Business, and I asked “How do you see militarization manifesting itself in Taiwan, overtly and subtly, positively and negatively?” Dr. Yang responded, “There’s been an obvious transformation of militarization in Taiwan in the last decades; the government has increased the military budget, and it has inaugurated new policies to encourage more people to serve in the military (“I know the government wants to extend the military service for young men” he says. “I’m not sure if that’s a good idea or not. I don’t think the young people like it”). “We do see an obvious trend to militarize Taiwan against the potential threat of China. Taiwan is encouraged to militarize itself by the U.S. The U.S wants to form an alliance with Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan against China. Taiwan is

left with no choice but to join this military alliance. On the one hand we do this on our own, because we perceive a threat. We are forced to militarize.” Dr. Yang has pinpointed some of the key aspects of exactly how Taiwanese people feel, particularly in terms of U.S. influence in terms of this issue—and here he sees that “The U.S. puts pressure on the government of Taiwan, and that pressure would then be put on the people,” one of the negative aspects we have discussed.

But make no mistake, Yang recognizes the “necessity” of ample military preparation in Taiwan, based on China’s threatening gestures. He goes on that “I see the issue in a positive way, because the government is protecting the people, and not only that, it also brings Taiwan closer to the global community. The alliances are a reality, so if you don’t want to get threatened by China it seems there is no other alternative. The negative thing is that we should not have to spend that much money on the military.” Dr. Yang concludes with an interesting view onto militarization and militarism, as we have discussed above. “We should distinguish militarization from militarism,” he says. “In Taiwan, militarization is a necessity. Militarism, on the other hand, is “from the inside,” and is associated with nationalism. I would say Taiwan currently does not have that militarist spirit. We don’t want to invade China, we don’t want to attack other countries with any spirit of imperialism, we only want to defend our sovereignty and territory.” That sounds like a moderate view onto all of this.

5. THE POINT OF CRITICISM

IN LIGHT OF ALL OF THIS, IT HAS BEEN POINTED OUT TO ME THAT Courtney Donovan Smith critiqued my Taipei Times editorial, stating that “Taiwan is not being militarized at all” (Smith, Taiwan News). I would have to say I disagree, and my argument remains that this is very much happening in Taiwan—though this must be understood along with the various disclaimers and opposing views that I have referred to. In addition, Smith argued that Taiwan's actions are prudent steps “implemented through the democratic process,” with the public in consultation with the government (Smith, Taiwan News). I can’t argue here, although Dr. Yang above brought up another side of this, and how the public may be being hoodwinked in terms of militarization. Though a valid point, it does not change my main thrust. Taiwan, as a fully free and democratic republic, does indeed rely on its citizenry to support and vote on government policies, and they have in the main done this in terms of the

Taiwan military, and any militarism associated with it. The Taiwanese public has expressed their support for the growth and use of the Taiwan military, but this does not change the fact that a very broad, and in many ways counterproductive, militarization process is under way here.

6. CONCLUSION: DEMILITARIZATION, NEUTRALITY AND MORE

TO CONCLUDE, I HAVE BEEN ASKED WHETHER THERE IS ANY possibility of Taiwan “demilitarizing,” or declaring neutrality in the future. Though this is very much a huge unknown, I think there might be just such possibilities. On the one hand, I can see Taiwan following Japan’s moves after WWII, and “demilitarizing” in that respect, reducing its military to a “self-defense force,” and in effect announcing fully peaceful aims in all its international affairs: “Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes” (“Japanese Constitution”). This is not quite disarmament (a policy adopted by a select group of peaceful, progressive nations), but it is on the right track. Taiwan has long been a “sister nation” with Japan, and I believe it might be willing to replicate the nation in this way.

As far as neutrality, I have commented on this in the Taipei Times (“Neutrality is Taiwan’s best option,” October 6, 2008). In this editorial I noted the value of adopting and endorsing an explicitly non-violent position in world affairs. I wrote, “Were China to threaten a nation that had renounced war...it would probably be subject to a storm of criticism and pressure from other nations. As well, other nations could likely support Taiwan politically and militarily, and pressure China to soften its stance if a neutral, non-violent stance were adopted. These developments could require China to pragmatically re-think it’s current positions vis-a-vis Taiwan.” We might, in a word, encounter a wealth of positive change in Taiwan, and in other nations with such a policy. “Most importantly, the threat of war with China could be reduced and hopefully eradicated. Taiwan’s international status could be bolstered.” That all sounds good to me, and might reduce militarization on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

In these ways, Taiwan could more effectively, and in effect peacefully, address the issue of militarization and its potential reduction in Taiwan. And as well, Taiwan, the nation, could

enact a better (if not quite “ideal”) maintenance of its national security—without resorting to excessive militarization, and the values that accompany it.

And finally, Schofield writes of the “orientative biases” of militarization, which slant the thinking of decision makers and “indoctrinate a state’s leadership...to the military perspective on security issues” (11). “High levels of militarization of a state’s government,” he continues, “increase both the probability of war, and produce less effective strategies. The increased probability of war results from the isolation and distortion of a state’s decision-making process so that it produces war-prone policies. It produces less effective strategies by privileging military instruments over diplomatic ones” (11). We see here again the conflict of the military and the diplomatic, and the time may be now for Taiwan to rethink its military approach and strategies, and offer up to its public and the world new thinking that can avoid the biases and failings inherent in “grand” militarization and militarism in a society.

I conclude here my overall look at this issue, important as it is becoming in Taiwan.

7. AUTHOR/S CONTRIBUTION

The writers affirm that they have no connections to, or engagement with, any group or body that provides financial or non-financial assistance for the topics or resources covered in this manuscript.

8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I/we authors declare that there is no potential conflicts of interest with any aspect this research work and publication. If any conflict arise in future, author will have sole responsibility.

9. PLAGIARISM POLICY

All authors declare that any kind of violation of plagiarism, copyright and ethical matters will taken care by all authors. Journal and editors are not liable for aforesaid matters.

10. SOURCES OF FUNDING

The authors received no financial aid to support for the research.

REFERENCES

[1] American Institute in Taiwan, “Taiwan Relations Act.” <https://www.ait.org.tw/policy-history/taiwan-relations-act/>.



[2] Bickford, Andrew, 2015. "Militaries and Militarization, Anthropology of," Science Direct, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304193644_Militaries_and_Militarization_Anthropology_of.

[3] Cheung, Eric, 2023. "A weapons stockpile and asymmetric warfare: how Taiwan could thwart an invasion by China—with America's help," CNN, April 16, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/15/asia/taiwan-china-invasion-defense-us-weapons-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>.

[4] Chin, Jonathan, 2023. "Ex-US officials back bolstering Taiwan's defense," Taipei Times, July 7, 2023, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2023/07/07/2003802819>.

[5] Colby, Elbridge, 2022. "America Must Prepare for a War Over Taiwan, Foreign Affairs Magazine, August 10, 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/america-must-prepare-war-over-taiwan>.

[6] González, Roberto J., Hugh Gusterson, Gustaaf Houtman, eds. 2019. Militarization: A Reader, Duke University Press. <https://www.google.com.tw/books/edition/Militarization/1N68DwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=militarization&printsec=frontcover>.

[7] Hsiao, Russell, J.D., 2022. "Taiwan's Bottom-Up Approach to Civil Defense Preparedness," Global Taiwan Institute, October 2, 2022, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/taiwans-bottom-up-approach-civil-defense-preparedness-hsiao-j-d-/>.

[8] The Japanese Constitution, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html.

[9] Malinconi, Michael, 2022. "Is the US moving towards strategic clarity on Taiwan?" Real Instituto Elcano, August 1, 2022. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/is-the-us-moving-towards-strategic-clarity-on-taiwan-the-repercussions-of-the-shift-for-europe/>.

[10] Oxford Learner's Dictionary, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/militarization?q=militarization><https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/militarization?q=militarization>.

[11] Pendery, David, 2023. "Militarization promotes violence," Taipei Times, June 4, 2023, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2023/06/04/2003800927>.

[12] Pomfret, John and Matt Pottinger, 2023. "Xi Jinping Says He Is Preparing China for War," Foreign Affairs Magazine, March 29, 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/xi-jinping-says-he-preparing-china-war>.

[13] Schofield, Julian, 2007. Militarization and War. Palgrave Macmillan. https://www.google.com.tw/books/edition/Militarization_and_War/OFABDgAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=militarization&printsec=frontcover.

[14] Smith, Courtney Donovan, 2023. “No, Taiwanese are not being militarized into violent people,” Taiwan News, June 11, 2023, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4915844>.

[15] Taipei Times, staff writer, 2023. “US is committed to Taiwan’s self-defense: official,” July 8, 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2023/07/08/2003802866>.

[16] Staff writer, 2022. “More reservists to take on tougher training next year,” December 7, 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2022/12/07/2003790274#:~:text=The%20dual-track%20reservist%20training%20program%20is%20continuing%20next,of%20National%20Defense%20said%20in%20a%20report%20yesterday>.

[17] Waters, M. Dane, 2021. “Time to switch to strategic certainty,” Taipei Times, May 1, 2021, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2021/05/01/2003756622>.

[18] Wikipedia, “Militarism,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Militarism>.

[19] “List of US arms sales to Taiwan,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_US_arms_sales_to_Taiwan.