

Taiwan Can Strengthen the Human Component of its Armed Forces through Greater Civil Society Engagement

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Abstract

Taiwan’s security is not solely a military challenge; it is a national imperative that demands whole-of-society engagement. This article argues that Taiwan must leverage its strengths as a technologically advanced and highly networked society to modernize its defense doctrine and strengthen the human component of its armed forces. Drawing on historical lessons from island defense and the transformation of warfare through technological revolutions, the article underscores the necessity of adapting military doctrine to contemporary challenges. Taiwan faces an adversary that excels at information warfare, asymmetric strategies, and long-term strategic coercion. As Ukraine’s experience demonstrates, civil-military integration and the mobilization of private-sector innovation are critical in modern conflict. By engaging a broader segment of society—including youth, academia, and the private sector—Taiwan can build a more resilient national defense. Hard power remains the foundation of deterrence, but its effectiveness depends on a dynamic, forward-looking doctrine shaped by the entire nation.

Nations make war the way they make wealth. In both endeavors, diverging from proven ways leads to disaster.

Taiwan faces both a challenge and an opportunity: the challenge is well known, the opportunity less so. Taiwan is uniquely positioned to capitalize on the epochal shifts reshaping both the global economy and modern warfare. Its security forces have been largely isolated for nearly five decades, yet during that time, Taiwan has led in developing new ways to generate wealth. The opportunity lies in applying these innovations to its defense strategy—enhancing its ability to deter and, if necessary, defeat aggression. This must be a whole-of-nation effort; the armed forces and security structure cannot do it alone, and every citizen of Taiwan has a stake in the island’s survival.

Change is constant, often disruptive and disorienting—but the scale of today’s transformation rivals that of the agricultural revolution 12,000 years ago, when nomadic tribes formed settled communities and, inevitably, made war. In the eighteenth

century, the Industrial Revolution enabled mass production of war materials, ushering in an era where mass destruction became the prevailing method of warfare. Taiwan must now adapt to the ongoing revolution in information and technology to ensure its security in this new era.

We are now grappling with the revolution in information and its application to both war—a political condition—and warfare—the conduct of armed combat. In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev declared to Americans, “We will bury you,” and followed this in 1957 with the launch of Sputnik. At the time, another shift was occurring largely unnoticed: by the late 1950s and early 1960s, knowledge workers in the United States began to outnumber factory workers for the first time, signaling a profound transformation in the nature of wealth creation. This development, later termed the “knowledge economy,” ushered in an era of rapid expansion in information processing, computerization, big data analytics, and automation. Developed economies now rely more on intellectual capital and specialized skills, and less on traditional industrial production.

This shift has also redefined the battlespace, extending beyond the traditional domains of air, land, sea, and undersea warfare to include space, cyberspace, the electromagnetic spectrum, and the information realm. The consequences have been far-reaching: enhanced surveillance capabilities, precision-strike weapons, and increasingly sophisticated disinformation campaigns designed to shape public perception and manipulate elections.

In such an environment, adaptation is not optional—it is imperative. General Charles Krulak, during his tenure as Commandant of the US Marine Corps, illustrated this point with a historical lesson. In a 1997 speech to the National Press Club—well known to many Navy and Marine officers—Krulak recounted the story of the Roman consul Publius Varus. Having previously triumphed over Germanic tribes, Varus entered battle again in 9 CE, expecting the same results. However, this time, the Germanic warriors employed asymmetric tactics that confounded the Romans, leading to the annihilation of three legions in the Teutoburg Forest. The Germanic tribes had adapted; the Romans had not. Varus’ final words are said to have been *Ne Cras, Ne Cras*—“Not like yesterday.”

Consul Varus was not the first—and will not be the last—commander to be outmaneuvered by an enemy that adapted faster and more effectively to shifting battlefield conditions. His story serves as a cautionary tale for military leaders: complacency in one’s own capabilities is a grave mistake, and failing to adapt invites disaster.

General Krulak delivered his remarks to a nation, and a national security establishment, still riding high on its victory in the First Gulf War (August 1990–February 1991). The overwhelming success of that campaign fostered a sense of confidence—perhaps even overconfidence—within the US defense community.

Krulak understood that to break through bureaucratic inertia, he had to craft a story that resonated with policymakers, force planners, and budget officials across the US government. He also knew that America's potential adversaries were studying the Gulf War just as closely, analyzing every detail to identify weaknesses and develop counterstrategies.

Taiwan and the Historical Legacy of Island Defense

China has long waged campaigns of propaganda, intimidation, and subversion against Taiwan. These efforts aim not only to weaken Taiwan's resolve but also to persuade its allies—especially the United States—that China's eventual annexation of the island is inevitable.¹ Under Xi Jinping, Beijing's rhetoric has grown more pointed, suggesting that force may be used not just in response to a Taiwanese declaration of independence but to compel unification outright. During his summit with President Joe Biden in San Francisco in November 2023, Xi reportedly stated, "Look, peace is . . . all well and good, but at some point, we need to move toward resolution more generally."²

Conventional wisdom holds that China's geographic expanse, economic power, and massive military buildup make its victory over Taiwan a foregone conclusion. History suggests otherwise. In 1940, Britain stood alone. Nazi Germany had overrun France, and the British Expeditionary Force had been forced into retreat. Though the evacuation at Dunkirk saved many soldiers, the British Army needed time to rearm and rebuild. Germany appeared unstoppable—yet it failed to achieve the air and sea superiority necessary to invade the British Isles.

A similar story unfolded in the Mediterranean. Malta, a British possession consisting of three small islands, was left with only six outdated biplanes for defense as the British homeland came under attack. Circumstances and sheer resolve allowed Malta to hold out, while the nearby island of Crete fell to German forces. Against the odds, Malta remained a British stronghold—proof that determined defenders can defy expectations.

Taiwan had a similar experience in World War II. The United States initially planned to invade Taiwan in support of its wartime ally, the Republic of China. Code-named *Operation Causeway*, the invasion would have been the largest amphibious campaign of the Pacific Theater and the most extensive sea-air-land engagement in history. However, deterred by the potential costs and complexities,

¹ John Dotson, *The Chinese Communist Party's Political Warfare Directed Against Taiwan: Overview and Analysis* (Washington: Global Taiwan Institute, (May 2024), <https://globaltaiwan.org/>).

² Matt Pottinger, ed. *The Boiling Moat: Urgent Steps to Defend Taiwan* (Washington: Hoover Institution Press, 2024), 8.

the United States and its allies opted instead for the invasions of the Philippines, Iwo To (then Iwo Jima), and ultimately Okinawa.

The battle for Okinawa would become the largest sea-air-land engagement of the war. Imperial Japanese Army Lieutenant General Mitsuru Ushijima's mission was to prolong the ground battle as much as possible, buying time for Japanese air forces—bolstered by waves of suicide pilots—to inflict heavy losses on the US Navy invasion fleet. He executed this strategy with ruthless efficiency. On the ground, his forces made extensive use of *reverse slope defense*, a tactic in which defenders position themselves on the far side of a hill or ridge rather than directly facing an approaching enemy. This technique not only concealed defensive positions but also forced attackers to crest the ridge, exposing themselves to concentrated fire at close range. The effectiveness of this method contributed significantly to the brutal attrition of American forces.

At one point during the battle, Admiral Chester Nimitz traveled to Okinawa to meet with Lieutenant General Simon Bolivar Buckner, the US Army commander overseeing ground operations. Nimitz, frustrated by the slow progress against the well-trenched Japanese defenses, urged Buckner to push forward. Buckner, in turn, questioned the admiral's qualifications to dictate ground combat strategy. Nimitz's response was blunt: he was the one "losing a ship-and-a-half a day," and if Buckner did not accelerate the offensive, he would be replaced.

Although China's military power may seem overwhelming, history demonstrates that well-defended islands are formidable targets. Taiwan's leadership possesses the means to strengthen its security, but it must act decisively. Diplomatic, economic, and informational tools all play a role in national defense, but they cannot substitute for hard power. Deterrence depends on military strength, and Taiwan's efforts must contend with both the rapid evolution of warfare and the institutional inertia of doctrine—both formal and informal.

The Tragic Costs of Drawing the Wrong Lessons: The French Military Experience in the Twentieth Century

Other examples of the consequences of failing to adapt have been far more costly. In *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919–39*, Robert Doughty (Colonel, US Army) examines how strategic and tactical thought in the French Army evolved from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 through the early days of World War II. The French attributed their defeat in 1870 to a lack of aggressiveness and an inability to maneuver effectively. Determined not to repeat that mistake, they developed a doctrine that emphasized rigorous training, unit-level *esprit de corps*, and an offensive mind-set built around mobility, maneuver, and attack.

Yet in the years between 1870 and 1914, technological advances fundamentally changed the nature of the battlefield. Improved steel production led to more powerful artillery, while the introduction of poisonous gas and the replacement of black powder with cordite and smokeless powder made warfare deadlier than ever. The battlefield of World War I became a lethal environment, defined by massed artillery barrages, interlocking machine-gun fire, and the widespread use of chemical weapons. Maneuver—once seen as the key to victory—had become a near-suicidal endeavor.

The result was catastrophic. French military doctrine, built on an outdated understanding of warfare, persisted far into the conflict. The cost was paid in blood. Infantry units were repeatedly ordered “over the top,” charging directly into entrenched positions under withering fire. The casualties speak for themselves: out of a military-age population of 13.35 million, France mobilized 8.41 million troops. Of these, 1,382,400 were killed or went missing, and another 3,549,880 were wounded. In total, nearly 60 percent of the French Army and 35 percent of the eligible population became casualties—a staggering price for failing to recognize the reality of modern war.

In response to the catastrophic failures of World War I, the French Army adopted a methodical warfare strategy during the interwar years—one centered on fortifications designed to blunt initial enemy offensives and inflict heavy casualties. These defenses, once they had absorbed the enemy’s first assault, would serve as fire bases for counterattacking forces advancing deliberately under the cover of rolling artillery barrages and armored support. Crucially, French planners deemed the Ardennes Forest impassable and thus saw no need to extend their man-made fortifications to the east—a strategic miscalculation of the highest order.

France, like much of the world, failed to grasp the full implications of technological advancements between the wars. The rapid evolution of three critical technologies—internal combustion engines, aircraft design, and radio communications (or “wireless” as it was called at the time)—should have dispelled the illusion of static defense. Instead, these innovations transformed warfare, vastly expanding the battle space and enabling unprecedented coordination of forces across land, sea, and air. Technology had returned maneuver to the battlefield with a vengeance, and France would pay the price for ignoring it.

The Challenge of Doctrine

Military doctrine defines how armed forces contribute to campaigns, major operations, battles, and engagements. A coherent doctrine clarifies what military means should be employed, how forces should be structured, where they should be deployed, and how different branches and services should coordinate their efforts. “Joint doc-

trine” extends this concept to multinational and interservice operations, ensuring a unified approach to warfare. Whatever its limitations, doctrine is an essential framework for any large organization—particularly one charged with the application of violence in defense of national security.

Doctrine, however, is only as effective as the assumptions underpinning it. When those assumptions go unchallenged, doctrine becomes obsolete—often with disastrous consequences. As history has repeatedly shown, failure to adapt doctrine to new realities invites strategic failure. Thus, revising and refining military doctrine is not merely an administrative exercise but a strategic imperative. This process must encompass both *formal doctrine*—the officially codified principles governing military operations—and *informal* or *cultural doctrine*—the ingrained habits, traditions, and unspoken assumptions that shape military thinking and decision-making. Cultural doctrine, often more deeply entrenched than formal doctrine, can be the most resistant to change and the most insidious when flawed.

A thorough reassessment of doctrine presents a significant opportunity. It must not be confined to closed circles of defense officials but should draw insight from across the government and the broader national security community. Moreover, it should involve civilian institutions, including universities and the private sector, leveraging the high rate of civil participation that has historically strengthened U.S. defense innovation. Deterrence cannot function in secrecy; doctrine that is openly debated and widely understood—both within and beyond the military—can serve as a powerful tool of strategic signaling. As many young minds as possible, whether in uniform, government service, academia, or industry, should be engaged in this effort. The stakes demand nothing less.

Contemporary conflict—most notably the war in Ukraine—offers a stark illustration of the critical role information technologies, largely provided and secured by private-sector companies, play in modern warfare. While SpaceX’s Starlink has garnered the most attention, numerous other firms have contributed capabilities in ways few anticipated.³ The battlefield is increasingly shaped by the proliferation of small unmanned aerial and maritime systems. Frontline troops now rely not only on military command structures but also on direct interaction with civilian technicians, who rapidly adapt signals and algorithms to counter Russian electronic warfare measures.

Taiwan must absorb these lessons with urgency. Protecting its national data infrastructure—an essential pillar of sovereignty—requires rigorous study and action. Securing and exploiting tactical data is equally vital: how it is gathered,

³ Matt Kaplan and Michael Brown, “The Private Sector on the Frontline: Big Tech and the Risky Blurring of Commercial and Security Issues,” *Foreign Affairs*, 31 January 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

transmitted, and leveraged will determine the effectiveness of operational and tactical decision-making. The ability to outpace an adversary in the information domain could be decisive in any future conflict.

Taiwan should actively involve its younger generations in this doctrinal reassessment. Doing so would not only bolster public commitment to national defense but also inject fresh, innovative thinking into military modernization efforts. A broader, more engaged base of participation could yield unconventional yet highly effective adaptations to collective security doctrines—ensuring that Taiwan is not merely prepared for future threats but positioned to deter them outright.

Conclusion

Taiwan stands at a pivotal moment in its security evolution. As history demonstrates, the ability to adapt doctrine, technology, and strategy to emerging threats determines the fate of nations. Taiwan must move beyond traditional defense paradigms and embrace a whole-of-society approach—one that integrates its technological advantages, civilian expertise, and the energy of its younger generations into a modernized defense posture.

The ongoing revolution in information warfare, automation, and networked defense systems has already reshaped the battlefield. Ukraine's resilience against Russian aggression underscores the decisive role played by private-sector innovation, flexible command structures, and a deeply engaged civilian population. Taiwan must learn from these experiences and institutionalize them into its own national defense strategy. Sovereignty in the twenty-first century is not just a matter of physical territory but also of information dominance, public resolve, and the ability to outmaneuver an adversary in both military and cognitive domains.

A future conflict in the Taiwan Strait will not be won by military force alone. Deterrence—and if necessary, defense—will depend on Taiwan's ability to harness its full national potential. This means strengthening civil-military cooperation, safeguarding critical data infrastructure, and fostering a strategic culture that prizes adaptability and innovation over bureaucratic inertia. The goal must not only be survival but strategic advantage.

Taiwan's future security will be shaped by the choices made today. To preserve its freedom, Taiwan must embrace change—not as a reaction to crisis, but as a deliberate and continuous process of strengthening its resilience. The lesson of history is clear: the nations that endure are those that prepare not for the wars of yesterday, but for the conflicts of tomorrow. ✪

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