



THE CULTURAL FACTORS OF DEFENCE REFORMS: THE CASE OF TAIWAN

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ABSTRACT

Contributing to the debate on Taiwan's defence build-up and scholarship on military change, this study explores cultural factors in the military and across society that shape defence reforms in Taiwan in the 2020s. Drawing on data from official documents, secondary literature, and twelve elite interviews with actors in the Taiwanese security sector, this study explores reforms to the force structure since 2022, the shift to an asymmetric warfare strategy, and efforts to build a whole-of-society defence. The findings show that the force structure and mobilisation reforms are limited by a military culture that undervalues conscripts and reserves, valuing stable routines. The reforms are also limited by the structure of civil-military relations. The reforms towards an asymmetric warfare strategy have been limited by resistance to unconventional methods of warfare, the Ministry of National Defence's wish to safeguard its monopoly over the armed forces, and by the existing command culture and procurement priorities linked to the different services. Lastly, reforms towards whole-of-society defence take place in the context of a historical devaluation of civil defence, institutional resistance from the Ministry of National Defence to share defence with civilian agencies, and military and political suspicion of trained civilians. However, the findings showed that changes in threat perceptions and practical training experiences have mobilised civilians and increased acceptance of civil preparedness. By indicating how cultural factors intersect and make change more or less likely, the findings have implications for scholarship on cultural factors behind military change, for debates on Taiwan's defence build-up, and for Taiwan's defence.

Keywords: Taiwan, military change, civil-military relations, defence reforms, cultural factors

INTRODUCTION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has increased the focus on the People's Republic of China's (PRC, hereafter called China) threats to invade the Republic of China (ROC, hereafter called Taiwan),¹ and Taiwan's ability to deter China and defend itself (Cabestan 2023; Pottinger 2024; US-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2025; for Taiwanese lessons from Ukraine, see, e.g., Ellison et al. 2025). In response to growing Chinese coercion and military power, Taiwan passed reforms to its force structure, conscription, and reserve military training in late 2022 and has since sought to enhance asymmetric defence capabilities and build whole-of-society defence resilience. Taken at face value, these reforms are assumed to strengthen Taiwan's defence (Dotson 2023; Pottinger 2024). However, voices in the debate also highlight considerable problems that may limit the outcomes. Reserve training is recurrently described as “a waste of time” with poor tactical training plagued by a lack of functioning equipment (Hunzeker et al. 2024: 66–67), and military service is spent on cleaning or yard work rather than training

(Dotson 2023). The organisational culture also makes subordinates “worry about passing ‘bad news’ up the chain of command”, senior officers “micromanage” tasks that could be done by lower ranks (Hunzeker et al. 2024: 66), and the military has low morale (Ko 2025a).

Whereas discussions about Taiwanese defence reforms often foreground tactics, defence budgets, strategy, recruitment, equipment, and doctrine, these issues suggest that cultural factors may condition reforms, and hence defence capabilities, in ways that are overshadowed by these specific focuses. Focusing on culture enables highlighting “the discrepancy between the formal and declared and the informal and undeclared” (Shamir 2011: 21) and why “military organizations may continue to pursue ways of warfare that are incompatible with emerging or prevailing strategic and operational realities or why they resist change” (Terriff 2006: 478). Previous scholarship on Taiwanese military culture has examined the officer corps (Wu and Hwang 2024) and more broadly the Ministry of National Defence (Hunzeker 2021; Hunzeker et al. 2024; Dotson 2025) and civil-military relations (Karalekas 2018). However, there is a lack of research that engages theoretical scholarship on military change to explore how cultural factors condition several related defence reforms in Taiwan over recent years. Addressing this theoretical and empirical gap, this study explores how cultural factors shape reforms of the military force structure, the debate on the need for an asymmetric warfare strategy and the adoption of such capabilities,² and efforts to build a whole-of-society defence. These three reform measures are diverse: while the first concerns defence mobilisation, conscription and reserve training, the second cuts across the Ministry of National Defence, the branch services, and defence procurements, and the third concerns civil-military relationships, civilian participation, and societal preparedness. Given the importance of geopolitical developments in the Indo-Pacific region, cultural factors influencing Taiwan’s defence capabilities warrant more in-depth analysis. The argument pursued is that there is a need to draw on existing theory to identify and discuss how cultural factors at different levels condition these diverse and recent defence reforms in Taiwan. Theoretically, the fact that cultural factors in Taiwan seem to operate at many different, entangled levels makes Taiwan a unique case for studying how cultural factors across the military and society may influence defence reforms. Understanding how cultural factors condition defence reforms in Taiwan is important for addressing the underlying issues and enabling more targeted reforms. Moreover, the results create a starting point for future studies on specific areas where cultural change has either been resisted or created.

To contextualise and understand the findings, a historical perspective on cross-strait relations and Taiwan’s shifting defence strategies is necessary. In 1945, the ROC replaced Japan’s 50-year rule of Taiwan. After losing the Chinese Civil War, in 1949, the ROC government, led by the Nationalist Chinese Party (Kuomintang, KMT), withdrew completely from Mainland China to Taiwan, Kinmen, Wuqiu, and the Matsu islands (Sullivan and Nachman 2024). Under the pretext of China’s threat and internal unrest, the authoritarian KMT-led state imposed martial law until 1987, after which Taiwan underwent a democratisation process (Templeman 2024).

China has never recognised the ROC regime or Taiwan as a sovereign nation and instead aimed to annex Taiwan, leading to military confrontation in the 1950s. However, after the ROC’s diplomatic isolation and its gradual loss of memberships in international organisations, China adopted a coercion strategy to achieve this through a political settlement (Sullivan and Nachman 2024; Bush 2025: 514–515).³

As China’s economy and geopolitical influence have grown, the defence gap across the Strait has widened (Cabestan 2023). In 2008, the KMT candidate Ma Ying-jeou became president by exploiting public concerns about cross-Strait tensions and opting for security through reassurance and increased economic ties across the Strait, which some saw as increasing Taiwan’s insecurity (Mei 2011; Bush 2025). In 2014, protesting the rapprochement with China and a trade agreement, the Sunflower Movement occupied the Legislative Yuan, paving the way for

the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to return to power (Templeman 2024). After Tsai Ing-wen came to power in 2016, Taiwan has gradually increased military capabilities while stressing the need to maintain status quo (Dotson 2025). With three DPP presidencies since 2016, the PRC has escalated disinformation campaigns, legal warfare, cyberattacks, air and naval incursions, and involvement in Taiwanese politics. To counter China's coercive approach, the United States (US) has sought to reassure the Taiwanese public of its support (Dotson 2025).

However, political polarisation and the lack of consensus on security policy limit Taiwan's capacities to address China's political and military challenges, emboldening China's coercive stance (Bush 2025). Political polarisation has further deteriorated since the election of William Lai in 2024, while China has conducted large-scale military exercises outside of Taiwan and neighbouring allies, effectively normalising People's Liberation Army (PLA) activity around Taiwan (Campbell 2024).

Taiwan has shifted its military priority from re-taking the mainland (1949–1965) to defence, deterrence, and denial strategies under different slogans (Forward Defence, 1966–1970; Defence in Depth, 1979–2000; Active Defence, 2000–2016; All-Out Defence, 2016–2024) (Chen 2009; Ministry of National Defence 2024). Currently, it combines a hybrid strategy of active defence and defence in depth, which both foreground counter-measure operations and deep strikes against the PRC, with an asymmetric strategy focused on survivability, resilience, and denying the PRC boots on the ground (Cabestan 2023; Dotson 2025; Ministry of National Defence 2025). As the PLA's military power has grown, elements of the older strategies have become increasingly challenged. Already in 2007, the US advised Taiwan to emulate asymmetric doctrines, tactics, and strategies of smaller countries. As part of this emulation, in 2017, then-Chief of Staff Admiral Lee Hsi-min presented the Overall Defence Concept, an asymmetric warfare strategy that seeks to exploit Taiwan's geography and the difficulties of a Chinese amphibious operation (Lee 2021).² The Overall Defence Concept was, however, abandoned after Lee's retirement in 2020.

In 2000, the armed forces, which had been tied to the KMT, were nationalised and organised into an all-volunteer force, with the aim of depoliticising them. Many officers, however, have resisted this. With a legacy from the martial law era and because the military is viewed as inefficient and bureaucratic, the population has low trust in the armed forces (Chong 2020; Templeman 2024).⁴ Taiwan's conscription, which in the twentieth century used to be between two and three years, was reduced from two years before the 2000 elections, then gradually in the 2000s to one year in 2008, and then to four months in 2013 (Murphy 2023). It is again one year since 2024. In 2025, the volunteer force consisted of 230,000 individuals (Lo et al. 2025), but due to discharges, only 80% of the units are fully manned (Fu 2025a).

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND METHODS

To analyse the material, this study draws on scholarship on change in the military. Farrell and Terriff (2002) argue that strategy, politics, culture, and technology constitute the main sources of “change in the goals, actual strategies, and/or structure of a military organisation” (Farrell 1996 as cited in Farrell and Terriff 2002: 5). While innovative change involves “developing new military technologies, tactics, strategies, and structures”, adaptive change involves “adjusting existing military means and methods” (Farrell and Terriff 2002: 6). Several adjustments can, over time, lead to military innovation.

According to Farrell and Terriff (2002), military organisations are often characterised by discrepancies between the procedural level and existing practices. They identify three pathways for cultural change: planned change, external shock that “undermines the legitimacy of existing norms”, and emulation from another military (Farrell and Terriff 2002: 8). When analysing how

major changes have been pursued and the factors influencing their outcomes, the focus will be on identifying such discrepancies, highlighting underlying assumptions and values, and identifying existing routines and practices that reforms need to challenge and replace. This study will also explore how divergent views on security strategy and the uniquely Taiwanese aspects discussed intersect with cultural assumptions, shaping strategic culture and civil-military relations.

This study is based on data from official documents, news coverage, secondary literature, and original data from twelve semi-structured elite interviews. The data collection was based on an exploratory research design, which is suitable for under-researched topics that lack a clear framework (Stebbins 2001). In an initial phase, documents were collected, and virtual interviews were conducted in 2024 and early 2025. During the revision process, additional documents were incorporated, and the interview data were analysed through a thematic, inductive approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). After this stage, further engagement with theoretical scholarship took place before the analysis was finalised.

Semi-structured interviews enable greater flexibility and allow participants to share their views and experiences with fewer constraints from the interview questions. While some participants were contacted directly through strategic sampling, others were identified through snowball sampling. The sample, listed in Table 1, reflects a diversity of participants who, for many years, have experience from working in Taiwan's defence, or in shaping and analysing Taiwanese security and civil preparedness, and who, from their positions and experiences, have unique and diverse insights into societal, historical, cultural, and institutional conditions for Taiwanese defence. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To protect participants' identities, details in the analysis that could enable identification have been either omitted or modified (Saunders et al. 2015).

Table 1. Interview participants

Participant number	Description
P1	Academic expert at a think tank
P2	Academic expert at a think tank
P3	Academic expert at a university
P4	Retired military official
P5	Non-governmental organisation (NGO) civil preparedness organiser
P6	NGO civil preparedness organiser
P7	NGO civil preparedness organiser
P8	Independent media organiser
P9	Former volunteer soldier with experience from Ukraine
P10	Former volunteer soldier with reserve training experiences
P11	Military officer at the All-Out-Defence Mobilisation Agency (AODMA)
P12	Military officer at the Armed Forces Reserve Command

The interview guide was informed by historical contextualisation and the literary review, with open-ended questions about participants' experiences with Taiwanese defence and recent reforms, efforts to build a whole-of-society defence, civil-military relations, and Taiwan's ability to defend itself through existing security strategies and preparedness. The fact that some participants were independent, academic experts, or retired soldiers, while others were personnel in the Ministry of National Defence involved in reforms, limited to some extent how the latter could criticise their own work or organisation. However, despite these limitations, the participants still critically discussed the reforms. Using in-depth interviews, it was possible to explore diverse perceptions of the defence reforms and their outcomes.

Before the analysis, the researcher first read all the documents, and thereafter transcribed and coded the interviews verbatim to label sections of text and describe the content, generating themes from code patterns. Afterwards, the researcher reviewed the themes to ensure that they accurately reflected the data. Lastly, the researcher defined the themes and wrote the analysis, drawing upon the theoretical concepts discussed earlier to interpret and discuss the themes and the outcomes of the reforms. In the analysis, the researcher also seeks to identify and discuss the different levels at which cultural factors shape each reform. For example, while one reform, due to its content, may challenge the military's established practical routines, other reforms may touch on the duties and sacrifices civilians are expected to make for Taiwan, and others may challenge military thinking, strategy, bureaucratic routines at the Ministry of National Defence, or values and identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the interviews, several themes emerged related to how cultural factors shape the recent reforms of the military force structure, manning, and training. On 27 December 2022, President Tsai presented the Military Force Restructuring Plan, which reorganised Taiwan's force structure, extended conscription, and amended its training.⁵ In contrast to how reforms strengthening defence had been perceived since the 2000s, this reform and the prolonged reserve training were publicly supported, likely due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's increased coercion (Lee 2024). However, the implementation of the reforms has met with challenges. The reserve training reform has been slow due to equipment and instructor shortages, and the enlistment of conscripts eligible for one-year military service was only 6% (6,956) in 2024, with most choosing to defer service to attend university. Due to this low intake, the training of unmanned aerial vehicles, man-portable air defences, and anti-tank rockets was postponed in 2024 (Ko 2025b; Lo et al. 2025). Moreover, to increase volunteer recruitment and retention, President Lai has increased their wages and benefits (Fu 2025b; Office of the President ROC 2025a).

Structures of Devaluation and Hierarchy, and Poor Material Conditions

In the interviews, cultural norms devaluing conscripts and reservists, and the time they spend in their services, emerged as prevalent within the military, particularly in the army. Several informants meant that the outcomes of these reforms depend on whether the armed forces can avoid making these services a “waste of time” (P2, P6, and P10) spent on cleaning and doing yard work (Dotson 2023; Hunzeker et al. 2024). This suggests that how participants feel valued may require attention (P2, P4, and P6), including highlighting a lack of resources for training, as evidenced by the cases of one instructor per 200 reserves and poor equipment (Wu 2022).

The lack of meaning was also reflected in statements indicating a preference for strict hierarchies over individual well-being or motivation (P4). In contrast to the air force's less hierarchical culture (P4), the army was described as valuing “discipline” and obedience without questioning (“just finish the work”; P9). Moreover, the purposes of daily activities are rarely explained, making lower ranks seldom understand “why they are doing what they are doing”, and changing things “very tiring” (P9).

Regarding training, the dynamic between underlying values and assumptions and poor material conditions emerged as a theme of why training outcomes are poor. Several informants described how the lack of functioning equipment, training grounds, modern weaponry, and instructors, as well as lousy boots and body armour, makes it practically difficult to challenge existing

structures (see also Hunzeker et al. 2024). In the experience of a reserve who underwent the 14-day reserve training, the only thing that was not a waste of time was the new, half-day training of Tactical Combat Casualty Care, taught by external medical instructors. The remaining days were spent mostly chatting and listening to lengthy briefings. Equipment was lacking, rifles were often jammed, and planning was poor (P10). Also, in contrast to the Ministry of National Defence's (2023) description, some people were recalled to their original hometown rather than where they live today (P10), indicating a discrepancy between stated goals and existing routines. The training itself was "worse than during the seven days of recall training... they just see the recall training as a difficult mission they want to finish as soon as possible and safely" (P10). Even if this is only one account, it indicates a preference for existing routines and safety above robust and meaningful training. The demoralising effect of this experience was reflected by other reserves' defeatist views on their potential participation in a wartime scenario (P10). Another account of the new, 14-day recall training, however, describes modernised training, feeling valued and new small unit tactics, although this account may not be representative (Chen and Xiao 2025).⁶

The relation between formal statements of change and institutionalised structures returned in discussions on conscription and reserve training. An NGO informant depicted the conscription and reserve training as "free-rider systems": "they can do anything they like; they can reject any reform and still have reservists", rather than having to "attract people" (P6). The comment highlights a structural lack of incentives to change, making bureaucratic resistance easier. On the level of the services, this lack of incentives reinforces existing routines. A former volunteer with combat experience from Ukraine explained:

Taiwanese commanders...don't have any leadership...that's why I went abroad to learn. Singapore, which is comparable to Taiwan, has better armed forces. But then people say they are well-prepared because they are rich. The change we need, however, is not something that would cost a lot. Our system is just traditional and lazy. (P9)

"Traditional" and "lazy" reflect how certain routines, norms, and behaviour have become institutionalised and thus obstacles to change (Rosen 1991: 8), making it difficult to challenge "existing routines, organisational rules, standard operating procedures, norms, practices and instruments" (Dyson 2019: 2). A civil society participant illustrated this behaviour with officers protesting a reform of work routines proposed by the new minister of defence out of "a desire to have a stable job" (P8). The former volunteer with experience from Ukraine described how Taiwanese special forces that trained in the US, upon their return, "still did the same things and could not implement anything new" (P9). This example seems to indicate that there is a lack of planning for how these experiences are going to be used in the organisation. Instead, existing routines prevail. This informant, however, emphasised that if somebody died, he thought that change would come fast. Even if this is only one person's view, the death of Hung Chung-chiu (洪仲丘) in 2013, which negatively affected the population's perceptions of the armed forces and led to the peacetime transfer of abuse cases from the military to civilian courts (Bush 2025), suggests that such "shocks", as conceptualised by Farrell and Terriff (2002: 8), could create cultural change. On the same theme, one scholar stressed that if the US were to send commanders to train the Taiwanese Army, they would bring their values and routines without the need to challenge or substitute existing ones (P2). While the reforms have improved the curriculum of conscription to be more realistic and aligned with training in "advanced countries" (Ministry of National Defence 2023: 97), reports indicate that after one year, the aimed-for improvements have, however, not been met. With many units operating at less than 80% due to high discharge levels, there is also a lack of volunteers to train the new garrison force (Fu 2025a).

Lack of War Adaptation, but Gradually Changing

Several informants highlighted the separation, both military and civilian, from the realities of war. However, they noted that changes are gradually making the military and society better prepared. The retired military official stressed that the military focuses on “yesterday’s war” in a time when “warfare changes so fast” (P4). The volunteer with war experience from Ukraine noted that specialised weapon training (such as man portable air defences or anti-tank weapons) is typically conducted by only a select few who become irreplaceable if they die, which is likely in a war, and that texts are often used instead of practical training. Additionally, the physical training is “insufficient” (P9; see also Karalekas 2018: 173). Taiwanese soldiers also do not use scopes, which is a modern standard (P9), and are only given 100–150 rounds per soldier compared to an international standard of 240 rounds (P9). Values related to strict gun laws (more developed further) also prohibit servicemen from buying their own equipment, despite wanting to, further limiting servicemen’s autonomy (P9).⁷ These patterns illustrate that at the service level, there are routines and organisational preparations that are not updated to war requirements and that persist despite increased Chinese coercion. A shift to more realistic preparations is also hampered by material factors, such as a lack of capacity to train more conscripts and reserves, or to train them for longer periods, or to use more training grounds (P2). These examples illustrate that existing routines and practices, as well as institutional arrangements, are not adapted to wartime requirements, and that adapting them and the existing military culture is more challenging due to material limitations.

“Scripted” exercises (P3) provide another example of a culture turned away from realistic conditions and valuable lessons (Dotson 2023). An AODMA personnel member explained that exercises have been “repetitive” because, given Taiwan’s situation, they only train defensive scenarios, but recently they have been modified to include drones and whole-of-society defence (P11). In 2025, the Han Kuang (漢光演習) exercise was unscripted and longer (Dotson 2025), indicating that leadership has begun to replace existing exercise routines, illustrating how leadership influences routines by changing the input values at the institutional level. An informant also described interventions by the defence minister, such as removing traditional “goose marching” and bayonet training (P1), as well as eliminating the need for servicemen to submit mandatory reports during leave (Chen 2024). These changes may indicate that selectively removing obsolete and autonomy-limiting routines is easier than shifting more entrenched routines, identity, or the organisation’s aims. While retired instructors have been hired for reserve training as planned, an informant involved in conscription reform contended that the one-year conscription still does not give conscripts enough time “to verify the combination of skills from all the training they add up” (P12). While the reform gradually adapts the military service to enhance Taiwan’s capability to defend itself, compared to extending conscription to 1.5 years, which would better meet defence requirements, one-year conscription shines forth as politically and organisationally less demanding.

Identity, however, also shone forth as a stake of the reforms. Some participants meant that the choice of a civilian defence minister was strategic to target military “nostalgia” and enable cultural change (P1 and P6). Two informants described how the military culture still hails the “Huangpu spirit”⁸ (P1 and P4) and shows weekly propaganda videos for conscripts and reserves focusing on “old times and the ancestors who won great battles, which makes people feel that the military is alienated from reality and uninspiring” (P1 and P10). Identity was identified as both organisational and national. An NGO participant noted that change is “very, very hard” because some people still question whether China is our enemy or motherland, saying that “reunification is the only way out”, and because of the commissariat system heritage in the military (P6). They added that, therefore, reforms are never limited to “the technical level but go way beyond that”,

pointing to the challenge of replacing existing norms, identities, and values in the military and among some groups in society. As another NGO participant noted, reforming the “old system”, from officer schools to military systems, would be “huge work” (P8). With younger generations coming in, who feel more like Taiwanese, and older generations leaving, the gap in identity would, however, close between civil society and the military; “It is a time question, but we don’t have much time!” (P8).⁹ Identities and values here appear as hard to replace, but in a process of transformation, as more people identify as Taiwanese. Even as these opinions are those of a few people, they illustrate that while some measures target institutionalised values, existing social and organisational structures inhibit change. In this context, a scholar spontaneously formulated the need for a forward-looking spirit “that could represent Taiwan” to replace the backwards-looking military culture of the ROC and decrease divisions between civilians and the armed forces (P1).

Civil-Military Relations and Societal Culture as Obstacles to Enhanced Defence Preparedness

As noted, civil-military relations and societal culture were identified as obstacles to enhanced defence preparedness. Several informants described a mutually reinforcing relation between the population’s low trust and stereotypical image of the military from the martial law era (P4, P6, and P7) and the military’s centralisation and “old ways” (P1), which one informant meant needs to be decreased to enhance popular support of those who enrol (P5). Some suggested that civilians lack respect, honour, and affection for soldiers (P9), and two informants argued that servicemen need better pay to increase retention and enhance training (P1 and P9). That President Lai has increased wages and benefits of volunteers (Fu 2025b) and sought to align the armed forces with the population to narrow the gap between them indicates leadership awareness of the problem and an attempt to change basic assumptions.¹⁰

Another theme was descriptions of a civilian culture of defeatism and a war denial mentality, related to people’s lack of war experiences, which inhibits preparedness. In this culture, people “still think that we shouldn’t fight the war because we would never have a chance to win” (P3), and “believe that if we can maintain peace, we don’t need to fight” (P2). Two informants described that people lack “a sense of urgency”, which is one reason why they have not pressured the government to adopt an asymmetric defence strategy (P3 and P4), preferring to see platforms like F-16s (P4). Furthermore, in this culture, people tend to forget the threat when calm reigns, and “wake up” when China conducts drills or when Russia invades Ukraine (P2 and P8). Some even deny that China would seize Taiwan (P7 and P9). This indicates that while officers and civilians live in the same society, they may experience different realities: the former are exposed to the stress of Chinese grey-zone coercion, while the latter live in an assumed peace and remain unprepared.

An alternative take could also be that civilians are separated from defence, whether they display this mentality or not. If this separation, rather than the mentality (insofar as they are distinguishable), matters more, then cultural change may be more probable than what a mere focus on the mentality predicts. However, the fact that people relate to and are prepared and mobilised for natural disasters (P6) illustrates that facing risks is differently coded culturally and politically. This is problematic for defence since individual officers need to feel the society’s support, and low preparedness might undermine support from allies (P4 and P3), which in turn may undermine the will to fight in Taiwan (P6). And because people “relate to things as if there is peace”, two informants described that attempts to create change become “energy-consuming” (P3 and P9). To address some of these assumptions, for example, the questioning of whether China will really invade Taiwan, one expert concluded: “we need to educate our population on

what kind of threat we are facing (through) strategic communication ...to let people know, not everything, but as much as possible so they can assess what they need to do” (P2). He added that non-governmental civil preparedness organisations (civil preparedness NGOs) are crucial for enhancing civil readiness and promoting civil education and change of norms. Overall, these comments suggest that change of the societal mentality regarding war risks is hindered by cultural understandings of peace/war and defence, as well as the population’s lack of involvement in matters of security. As the historical section indicated, affecting the population’s perceptions of security and whether Taiwan can defend itself is also a stake in China’s information warfare and for the willingness to fight. However, willingness to fight may also be affected by material and other factors, such as income, education, political orientation, and confidence in the military (Wu 2025) and US support (Wenger et al. 2026), indicating that cultural factors intersect with these factors. Educating people or involving them in defence is also challenging since leaders are wary of scaring people in this culture (Dotson 2023; Liu et al. 2023). For this reason, one informant stressed, “reforms need to be framed very carefully ...otherwise they will be perceived as too controversial” and not pass (P8). Cultural change across civil-military relations, however, tends to be easier if there are “shocks” to the cultural system, or if leaders “confer legitimacy to new goals or new missions” to shape public opinion while at the same time creating “a political environment that is conducive to military change” (Farrell and Terriff 2002: 270). To some extent, President Lai’s efforts to support servicemen and bridge the gap between civil society and the armed forces illustrate such efforts. Leaders of civil preparedness NGOs, such as Enoch Wu, also seek to challenge the mentioned culture from the grassroots level (Jobin 2025).

A final theme was that political polarisation and a lack of rational debate about how defence should be built and used make reform difficult (P1, P2, P6, and P8). With one informant, because Taiwan is a “very complicated society” where political divisions “create specific interpretations of any security-related event or item” (P4), the “military force build-up programme becomes a political issue rather than a discussion of whether it’s good or not for our military capabilities” (P4). This indicates that contending views of security, as well as different identities developed in the history section, intersect with and limit efforts to change.

Cultural Resistance to Methods of Unconventional Warfare

Another group of themes that emerged in the interviews regarded Taiwan’s shift or lack of shift to an asymmetric warfare strategy and unconventional warfare methods. A key argument for Taiwan adopting an asymmetric strategy is that its current capabilities are not suited to counter China’s “qualitative and quantitative overmatch” in an invasion scenario (Kanapathy 2024: 102). While proponents of adopting such a strategy tend to emphasise an invasion scenario, opponents emphasise the need for conventional platforms to withstand coercion through grey-zone tactics or a blockade. Resistance to such a strategy has also stemmed from bureaucratic rivalries within the military’s different services, where careers and status have grown around certain platforms (Dotson 2025). Additionally, the discourse on asymmetric warfare, with Hunzeker, has been used in Taiwan to cast “the old way of doing things in fashionable jargon” (Hunzeker 2021). While a strategy shift to the Overall Defence Concept, as mentioned, was abandoned in 2020, procurements in line with it began in 2019 (Hunzeker 2021, see also Rickards 2024), and these ideas returned in Taiwan following Ukraine’s capacity to withstand and roll back Russia’s offensive in 2022 (Cabestan 2023; Hunzeker et al., 2024; P1, P2, P3, and P4). The Ministry of National Defence’s 2023 annual report states that the armed forces will continue to train and enhance asymmetric warfare based on the lessons learned from the Russia-Ukraine war to “target the PLA’s weaknesses and offset its advantages...to take advantage of the Taiwan Strait natural barrier” (Ministry of National Defence 2023: 73). The only planned goal, as of 2024, was “asymmetric resilience of defence”, with assets towards that aim listed in a five-year force-build-

up plan. This contrasts with the Overall Defence Concept, which foregrounds specific methods for conducting unconventional warfare (Lee 2021).² In 2025, “survivability” and “agility” were central concepts in Ministry of National Defence reports (Ministry of National Defence 2025). Formal statements, values, and concepts linked to asymmetric warfare are thus increasingly used to explain how Taiwan shall defend itself, given its limited resources.

In the interviews, the discrepancy between formal statements and practice regarding asymmetrical warfare was a theme (P2, P3, and P4). A shift to unconventional warfare was described as either resisted or yet to be realised. Reflecting that “asymmetrical warfare” denotes disparate things in Taiwan (Hunzeker 2021), using simulators and a small quantity of ammunition during training was described as “asymmetric warfare training” (P11). Resistance to its implementation stemmed, according to two participants, from “dominant symmetrical thinking” in the military, not least in the army (P3 and P4), and from a culture of centralised command and hierarchy (P1, P2, P4, and P11). Two former army volunteers (P9 and P10) explained that soldiers are not trained in the culture of lower-rank initiatives grounded in knowledge of the mission and the commander’s intent (known as mission command [Shamir 2011]). Instead, “everything needs permission from the commander, who will therefore need to go to the frontline and risk his life, just like the Russians do in Ukraine” (P4). Two scholars, however, noted adaptive, institutional changes, such as organising units of 300 personnel equipped with light anti-tank, anti-aircraft, and anti-ship weapons, as well as domestic production of long-range missiles, unmanned ships, and lighter equipment for decentralised command and control (P2 and P3), which bring with them more decentralised methods. A military informant clarified, however, that only active-duty soldiers train on such systems, and training is implemented slowly, indicating organisational limits to a larger or faster asymmetric capability build-up (P12).

Pre-empting the Martialisation of the Population

In the interviews, a theme of pre-empting the martialisation of the population, to “protect” it from war and to shield the military from the population, emerged. This was illustrated by the resistance to a territorial defence force, a key component of the Overall Defence Concept, and to militias and less strict gun laws (P1, P5, P6, P7, and P9). Informants described how the debate criticising a territorial defence force meant that it would “scare” people and bring “war closer to the population” (P2, P4, and P5). Also, resistance stemmed from the army’s fear of a civilian Ministry of Interior-organised force, which would break their monopoly on armed forces and force them to improve (P4; see also Lee and Hunzeker 2022), and risk overthrowing them in a coup (P5). These examples illustrate how a protective culture with regard to the population overlaps with a perceived threat to the army’s existing routines and status, but also a more existential worry about armed civilians with echoes from the Chinese civil war and Taiwan’s turbulent history. Since a territorial defence force is a ground force, this resistance is likely greater in the army than in other services. Another foregrounded factor, which is not purely cultural, was the lack of adequate training grounds for a territorial defence force (P1 and P3). In addition, as the discussion on Taiwan’s defence indicated, there is a shortage of officers to train civilians, and the garrison force may be seen as taking the place of a potential territorial defence force. Nevertheless, the idea of training and arming civilians came across as controversial, and the history behind resistance to militias and strict gun laws returned in the interviews. One officer described this history:

Back when the ROC was still on the mainland, some people with weapons disobeyed orders. So, in Taiwan, if you want to use a weapon legally, you must join the armed forces or reserves. Another reason is that in Taiwan, we have a lot of people from China. So, in a war scenario, who will shoot at whom, and who will be on whose side? This is difficult to identify. This is why we are cautious of militias. (P11)

The narrative reflects a lack of trust in the civilian population, concerns about sharing the same language and physical features as one's assumed enemy, and internal divisions in Taiwan. When this informant asked superiors at the Ministry of National Defence about the possibility of militias, they explained that militias "would make the society nervous," and the Ministry of Interior stated that carrying a gun is forbidden by law (P11). These cross-references to existing cultural norms and laws indicate their entrenched status.

Given how the implementation of a territorial defence force would require challenging both cultural norms within the society and the military, and the army's organisational status, and require large practical changes, changing existing structures is difficult, as reflected by bipartisan resistance to a territorial defence force in the wake of the Overall Defence Concept, described by one informant:

There was neither a committee to evaluate it nor a national debate. There was a refusal to discuss it. If we at least had a week-long debate or report on it, with arguments and a conclusion that it is not feasible... but there was no discussion on it. (P4)

Thus, in contrast to how Sweden and other small countries historically created territorial defence forces to deter threats from larger states and involve civilians in defence, the identified factors make such a change in Taiwan unlikely.

Civil Preparedness as a Contested Domain for Cultural Change and Societal Preparedness

The last themes in the interviews concerned recent efforts to build a whole-of-society defence, for which civil preparedness is central. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, civil preparedness has increasingly been viewed as fundamental to civilian protection and as an asset for increasing society's deterrence and resilience (Hsiao 2022). To enhance collaboration between the government and civil society and increase societal resilience, President Lai's Whole-of-Society Defence Resilience Committee initiative, preceded by President Tsai's all-out defence initiative, emulates collaborative civil-military structures from countries such as Sweden, Finland, and the Baltic states. The Committee, established in 2024, aims to involve civil society in planning and training to establish structures that can ensure the continuity of societal functions in the event of an attack or disaster (Office of the President ROC 2025b). Taiwan's civil defence, which is under the National Police Agency, has long been underfunded and poorly trained (P4 and P6; Bergström 2024), indicating that it has not been valued in Taiwan's defence strategies. There are plans to train more people in the coming years (Chan and Murphy 2025), and the official civil defence is complemented by the mentioned civil preparedness NGOs (Hsiao 2022). In 2025, these organisations claim to have trained more than 100,000 individuals in civil preparedness skills (excluding online participation; Tan 2025), presenting a new element in Taiwan's defence mobilisation.

In the interviews, civil preparedness, whether organised by the government or by NGOs, appeared both as a domain for cultural change regarding society's involvement in matters of defence and sovereignty and, as such, as contested. Like the resistance to a territorial defence force, informants highlighted the Ministry of National Defence's reluctance to delegate command of defence outside the Ministry of National Defence (P2), fearing empowered trained citizens (P5). Echoing formal statements by the Ministry of National Defence (2023), an AODMA informant described how civil defence, in wartime, "will help deal with operations by cooperating with local government and the military ...and different units" (P11). By contrast, a civil society participant described how preparations and plans for civil defence tend to remain

statements, indicating a discrepancy between formal plans and actual practice: “they are only on paper... only concepts... no substance”, or classified (P8). These differences illustrate two distinct perspectives on the relationship between formal statements and existing practices.

The informants also described how civil preparedness NGOs are contested. A common cultural assumption in Taiwan is that national defence is the sole responsibility of the armed forces (P3), reflecting civilian fear of a return to the martial law era (P8) and reinforcing the separation of civilians from defence. This culture is supported by the mentioned political use of fear, with the KMT and Taiwan’s People’s Party (TPP) framing civil preparedness NGOs as “militias” (P1) and their training as “provocations” (Liu et al. 2023).

Diverging Cultural Norms of Preparedness

Echoing the observation on civil preparedness being framed as provocations, an informant also described differences in norms regarding disaster preparedness and war preparedness:

With civil defence, it should be like with natural disasters: if we prepare for them, we are not provoking them! [laughter]. The same applies to civil defence, which is primarily about saving lives. But there is still a lot of work to be done to persuade civil society. (P8)

To avoid being inhibited by this culture, civil society organisations have framed teaching about hybrid war and civil preparedness as natural disaster preparedness (P8), a structure that has enabled them to incorporate war preparedness (Jobin 2025). The challenge of replacing basic political assumptions about provocations with saving lives illustrates the challenge of increasing preparedness, but also how it is contested. Research shows that practical training in Taiwan changes norms by empowering people and spreading civic education on preparedness, rather than relying on ideological contestation of ideas (Jobin 2025).

Cultural Change-Drivers Despite Resistance

Three participants emphasised that altered security perceptions during crises drive cultural change regarding civilian preparedness and involvement in defence (P11, P3, and P7). The shock of the Ukraine invasion and increased Chinese coercion have led to “an explosive development” of people joining NGO civil preparedness training (P7). An NGO participant described how NGOs actively challenge the cultural separation of civilians from the defence and the disempowerment that results from it. By increasing civic education and changing norms, they seek to “change how society thinks” (P8) and thereby reduce the political and cultural costs of change. Another civil society participant explained that “practical examples” of their training demonstrate to political leaders and civilians that “we can do it, (that) it is easy and cost-effective” (P6). Contrary to the rigid structures of the armed forces, the independent status of these groups also allows them to “adopt new techniques, new ways of doing and teaching”, which, when proven effective, can be adopted and disseminated by local governments (P6). Another NGO participant explained how they envisage training trainers and household members across Taiwan as a strategy for cultural change and grassroots preparedness (P7). In the context of cultural resistance to increasing preparedness in Taiwan (as illustrated in previous sections), these descriptions point to how major changes in preparedness and cultural change are inseparable when it comes to involving civilians in defence in Taiwan.

CONCLUSION

By exploring the complex intersections of cultural factors in the Taiwanese context that shape the government's attempted changes in defence in recent years, the results contribute new knowledge to debates on Taiwan's defence preparedness and to the literature on military change. Drawing on existing theory to understand how cultural factors intersect at different levels and shape these diverse and recent reforms in Taiwan, the findings showed that cultural factors at multiple levels condition these reforms in several ways. The Military Force Restructuring Plan, the analysis showed, may be limited by a culture that undervalues conscripts and reserves, with a preference for stable routines over professional development. This culture was reflected in a hierarchical command structure and, to some extent, in poor material conditions, even if the latter may not be cultural in themselves. Institutionally, the undervaluing of conscript and reserve training was also linked to the fact that the armed forces receive conscripts and reserves, no matter how inefficient or meaningless the systems and their training are. Another finding was that societal culture and identities across society, the legacy of the martial law era, as well as the mere physical and professional separation of civilians and the military, beyond cultural factors, negatively impact civil-military relations and thus civilian support for defence and servicemen. Previous research shows that with longer conscription and better training, volunteers tend to value conscripts more since they become a worthwhile investment (Grissom 2006). Improved and prolonged training, more instructors, and improved material conditions could therefore both increase volunteers' valuation of conscripts and reserves, and the latter's sense of "value in the work they are doing while in uniform" (Karalekas 2018: 171).

The section on Taiwan's adaptation to an asymmetrical warfare strategy indicated that the Overall Defence Concept and unconventional methods of warfare were resisted due to a symmetrical, centralised, and hierarchical culture in the military, not least in the army. The findings showed that several cultural factors intersected on different levels across society and the military. Shifting to an asymmetrical warfare strategy would require challenging historically inherited norms and laws related to civil-military relations, the Ministry of National Defence's monopoly on armed forces, the army's status, the existing command culture and methods of warfare, as well as procurement priorities linked to the different services. It would require transforming the institutional culture and bureaucratic interests by replacing basic values, existing routines, tactics, strategies, and structures, as well as dominant understandings of the roles of civilians and the military in war (Farrell and Terriff 2002; Dotson 2025). Despite resistance to ideas related to an asymmetrical warfare strategy, the findings showed that the armed forces, through procurement of more mobile weapon systems, have still begun adopting organisational structures and methods of unconventional warfare and decentralised command. In line with research on military change (Rosen 1991; Farrell and Terriff 2002), this may indicate that when reforms are not perceived as immediate threats to officers' routines and status, or the Ministry of National Defence's institutionalised preferences, they are less likely to be resisted.

Lastly, the section on reforms towards whole-of-society defence resilience showed that the Ministry of National Defence's historical devaluation of civil defence, its unwillingness to share defence with civilian agencies, and military and political suspicion of trained civilians affected perceptions of efforts to enhance civil preparedness. This was the case both for the official, underfunded, and undertrained civil defence forces and for preparedness NGOs, whose training has been contested by the current opposition parties. However, the findings showed that changes in threat perception and practical training experiences have mobilised people and made civil preparedness more accepted and widespread, challenging values and assumptions that alienate civilians from preparedness and defence (see also Liu 2024). Apart from cultural factors, reforms may also be limited by the physical separation of civilians from the defence and by underdeveloped civil-military collaboration.

Using a small sample and based on the participants' views and assessments, the results are not generalisable. While some participants were more outspoken, others were limited by their positions. Additionally, alternative factors, such as economic or budgetary constraints, regional security dynamics, and diplomatic pressures, as presented in the historical sections, have been largely omitted from the analysis. These limitations, however, were not deemed to affect the overall results. This study enabled the exploration of patterns of cultural factors on different levels across the military and society that condition these reforms. The results help in understanding the complex intersections of cultural factors at different levels across institutions and society, and how historical experiences condition these reforms, indicating areas where change is more or less likely, and how material and cultural factors together can limit or enable change. Whereas current debates on Taiwan's defence focus on defence budgets and procurements, beyond this focus, the results indicate the potential for Taiwan to address cultural factors to enhance defence resilience. Additional research could examine how new procurements and increased defence exchanges between the US and Taiwan influence defence policy and foster cultural change, as well as how President Lai's leadership seeks to create cultural change. Additionally, a systematic examination of the outcomes of the new recall and conscription training is needed once sufficient time has passed to evaluate them.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author declares that this study adheres to the ethical requirements. The Swedish Ethical Review Authority deemed this study exempt from ethical review. When contacted, the interviewees were provided with written information about the study and their right to withdraw. Participation was voluntary, and consent was obtained orally at the beginning of each interview.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that the study was carried out without any financial or commercial ties that might be interpreted as a potential conflict of interest.

NOTES

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- ¹ This is done except in the historical background section, where the ROC regime per se is denoted as it came to Taiwan and as it later became diplomatically isolated.
- ² Asymmetrical warfare refers to any conflict in which the material resources between the parties are uneven. However, the concept usually denotes a weaker party's use of unconventional warfare against a materially superior adversary, focused on attacking the latter's vulnerabilities (Arreguín-Toft 2001). This is how the concept is used here. By contrast, in symmetrical warfare, the adversaries possess comparable military capabilities and resources, similar tactics, and a shared understanding of what winning the war entails. As an example of the former, the Overall Defence Concept emphasises deterrence and, if Taiwan is attacked, to deny the PRC's annexation of Taiwan. Its strategic pillars of operations are force protection, decisive battle in the littoral zone, and destruction of the enemy at the landing beach. Its definition of "winning the war" is to survive the PLA's initial attacks to deny the PLA "boots on the ground" (Lee and Lee 2020), and to inflict maximal damage on its forces until external aid arrives. Force preservation includes "mobility, camouflage, concealment, deception, electronic jamming, operational redundancy, rapid repair and blast mitigation" (Lee and Lee 2020). Using numerous smaller, mobile weapons enables exploiting natural advantages "while delivering maximum tactical impact with minimal effort" and enables dispersion. The Overall Defence Concept emphasises the role of the reserve as a territorial defence force, and the need to "capitalise on all available military and civilian assets to muster a whole-of-society effort" (Lee and Lee 2020).
- ³ From 1979 to 1983, China developed the concept of "one country, two systems" to replace the ROC regime with a "special administrative region" on Taiwan (Sullivan and Nachman 2024: 68). For the KMT, however, ROC regime survival has been the core security goal (Bush 2025). The US-Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 gave Taiwanese hope that the US would be politically committed to Taiwan's cause. With diplomatic isolation, the lifting of the martial law, and democratisation, conditions for security changed. First, a sense of security grew, but later, as Taiwan sought to decrease its isolation in the 1990s, tensions arose again, resulting in the third Taiwan Strait crisis in 1995–1996 (Templeman 2024).
- ⁴ Surveys, however, tend to measure confidence in the military's capacity to defend Taiwan rather than trust in the military institution. For a measure of the former, see Wu (2025).
- ⁵ The force structure is now divided into a main battle force of volunteers, a garrison force of conscripts commanded by volunteers, a reserve force of retired volunteers, and a civil defence force of alternative service conscripts, special police, and units of volunteers organised by the local government (Ministry of National Defence 2023).
- ⁶ This account was from a session that was used to showcase the new training, creating a risk that it is not representative of most sessions.
- ⁷ Taiwanese-made scopes will, however, become integrated into training (Chin 2024).
- ⁸ The Huangpu Military Academy was the first modern military academy in China, founded in 1924. The academy's goal was to create a revolutionary army to mount an expedition against the warlords. It was based on organisational and training methods from the Red Army, which Chiang Kai-shek had studied in Moscow before he was appointed commandant of the academy. It copied the Red Army's commissariat system and was initially supported by Soviet instructors, weapons, and ammunition (Dillon 2010).
- ⁹ The annual poll of the National Chengchi University measures changes in national identity. In 1992, 46.4% identified themselves as Taiwanese and Chinese, 25.5% as Chinese, and 17.6% Taiwanese. In 2024, 30.4% identified as Chinese and Taiwanese, 2.2% as Chinese, and 64.3% as Taiwanese, indicating a substantial, ongoing change over time (Ko 2025a).
- ¹⁰ In several speeches and visits at military inaugurations and celebrations in 2025, among them the Huangpu Academy's 100th anniversary, President Lai has sought a leadership strategy of "returning to the past for inspiration and instruction" (Shamir 2011: 25) to reframe the Huangpu to be aligned with the people and its protection (Office of the President ROC 2025a).

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