



INSIGHT: GREATER CHINA

Taiwan extends mandatory conscription, modernizes defence as threats from Beijing escalate

THE TAKEAWAY

As part of an extensive defence overhaul, Taiwan will extend the length of conscription for men from four months to one year starting in 2024. The island increasingly sees national security as a top priority thanks to intensifying threats from Beijing, but growing calls to boost defence capabilities create complex implications for cross-strait relations, domestic politics, and Taiwan's youth.

IN BRIEF

President Tsai Ing-wen announced at a [press conference](#) on December 27, 2022, that Taiwan is extending the length of conscription for men from four months to one year, as part of a [policy package](#) to “strengthen all-out defense and realign the nation’s military force structure.” The policy will affect male citizens born in or after 2005. Salaries for conscripts will be raised by more than 304 per cent, from C\$289.60 (6,510 NTD) per month to C\$1,170.40 (26,307 NTD) per month by 2024.

Roughly 90 per cent of the Taiwanese armed forces are volunteers, with the rest being conscripts. Under Tsai’s blueprint, volunteers will remain the backbone of the Taiwanese army, but conscripts will fill the

majority of a “standing garrison force” that improves overall battle-readiness in local areas and assists specialist personnel. Tsai pledged in her speech to modernize training for the one-year conscripts by incorporating “realistic combat training courses, live-fire marksmanship drills, joint exercises, and even civil defense coordination.” Conscripts will be trained in the use of Stinger missiles, Javelin missiles, Kestrel rockets, drones, and other weapons, with many of those weapons acquired through arms sales from the United States.

IMPLICATIONS

Before 1990, Taiwanese men served either two or three years of conscription, depending on the branch of the armed forces to which they were assigned. With the end of martial law, the dawn of democratization, and a warming of cross-strait relations, successive Taiwanese administrations gradually reduced the length of conscription until it was shortened to only four months in 2013. Ten years later, re-extending conscription is a clear response to [heightened risks](#) of Chinese aggression. Beijing continues to prefer “peaceful unification,” but has steadily built up military capacities to prepare for [a takeover by force](#). Ultranationalist rhetoric has flourished on the

mainland under Chinese President Xi Jinping, and came to a [dramatic climax](#) during U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. Events in 2022, from the Russia-Ukraine war to the Pelosi visit, made the risk of conflict particularly salient to Taiwanese society. Duke University's 2022 [Taiwan National Security Survey \(TNSS\)](#) found that around 79 per cent of Taiwanese support extending conscription to one year, but only 41.7 per cent believe that the Tsai administration has prepared Taiwan for a potential Chinese invasion. Moreover, 66.4 per cent do not believe the island can defend itself without U.S. military involvement. This is, in part, due to relatively outdated training for conscripts, for whom bayonet drills are still mandatory and advanced weaponry are often out of reach. Security experts in Taiwan [broadly commended](#) the proposed training reforms, but pointed out that the plan can go further by formalizing a reserve force and training conscripts at potential future battle sites like airports and water reservoirs.

With a presidential election in early 2024, commentators have speculated that extending conscription will cost Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) [support](#) among young voters. According to media interviews, responses from youths and students have been [mixed](#): while many are put off by the prospect of spending more time in mandatory service and criticize the military's perceived antiquatedness, they also feel a sense of duty. [Some say](#) that they welcome the salary increase, which would allow them to save around [C\\$14,000](#) (240,000 New Taiwan dollars) during conscription. As military reform takes shape over the last 12 months of Tsai's presidency, the DPP will need to assure young voters that their sacrifice will be of real value to the island's defence.

WHAT'S NEXT

1. Closer military ties with the U.S.

Tsai said in her December 27 speech that to modernize conscript training, the army will incorporate "the training methods used in the

United States and other advanced nations." Taiwan's defence reform will almost certainly lead to closer relations with the U.S. military, but such moves are also contingent upon domestic politics. Taipei's relationship with Washington is a divisive topic for the Taiwanese public, and Tsai's critics have long argued that increased U.S.-Taiwan collaboration will subjugate the island to American geopolitical interests.

2. Negotiations over defence reform

Debates over the new training program are still ongoing, as 2023 conscripts are slated to receive updated training modules in their four-month service periods. The opposition Kuomintang (KMT), for its part, has come out in support of extending conscription and proposed its own [set of policies](#) for improving the conscription system, including allowing conscripts to apply for advanced specialisms and providing additional privileges to soldiers.

3. Deterring Beijing while expanding battle-readiness

Cross-strait deterrence remains a shared principle across major political camps in Taiwan, though interpretations differ. The KMT has called on the Tsai administration to further prioritize de-escalation, while Tsai stresses that "[the] better prepared [Taiwan is], the smaller the chance of adventurism from across the strait." Meanwhile, a spokesperson for China's Taiwan Affairs Office [said](#) on January 11, 2023, that the Tsai administration is "coordinating with external forces to push Taiwanese youth onto the battlefield as 'cannon fodder'." Navigating a military buildup at home without being perceived as provocative, which lends credibility to Beijing's claims, will be a complex challenge for Taipei as it implements its security vision.

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