

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN TAIWAN

Identity and Transformation

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BY

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INTRODUCTION: THE ARMED FORCES OF THE REPUBLIC OF CHINA (ROC)

The Armed Forces of the Republic of China (ROC) refers to the country's Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and Military Police Force. Originally called the National Revolutionary Army at its inception in 1925 in China, it was renamed the Republic of China Armed Forces with the 1947 promulgation of the ROC Constitution. Since 1949, the force's primary goal was the ROC government's objective of retaking the mainland (China) from the Communists. Known as Project National Glory, this imperative was front-and-center until the 1970s. As the military balance in the Taiwan Strait began to shift from one favoring the ROC to one favoring the People's Republic of China (PRC), the focus of the ROC military began to shift to a defensive posture, defending the islands of Penghu, Quemoy, Matsu, and Taiwan (Formosa) from invasion by China's People's Liberation

Army (PLA). The PLA remains the predominant – indeed, the only – threat to the ROC today.

While still the National Revolutionary Army, it was essentially the military arm of the Kuomintang (KMT). Even after becoming the ROC Armed Forces in 1947, and relocating to Taiwan in 1949, the ROC remained a de-facto one-party state ruled by the KMT, and the military remained essentially the KMT Army, with political indoctrination to ensure the loyalty of its members, and political officers and commissioners installed in each company's unit to monitor that loyalty.¹ Today, the political warfare department does not wield the power it once did, and political officers can no longer take over command of the unit in the name of ensuring loyalty to the government as they once could.

As a result of this history, the military has long been regarded by most Minnan-speaking Taiwanese (those whose ancestors moved to the island starting in the seventeenth century, as opposed to the so-called Mainlanders who arrived from mainland China following the 1949 KMT defeat at the hands of the Communists) as being very much the “KMT army.” The extent to which this perception persists is very much of interest when determining the civil–military relationship in Taiwan. Also because of this history, however, the ROC military has had far fewer of the problems associated with military interventions in politics, as has historically been the case in such democratized Asian states as Indonesia, Thailand, South Korea, and Japan. Unlike these nations, there has never been an attempted military coup d'état in the ROC on Taiwan – a testament to the Chiang regime's grip on power and the tight control it exerted over its military. Thus, on the one hand, conditions exist today for low popular regard for the military, especially as regards a military career, and yet the principle of civilian control over the military – a doctrine in military and political science – is

perhaps stronger in Taiwan than in many comparable Asian states.

In the 1970s, when first the United Nations, and later the United States, derecognized the ROC in favor of the PRC, the leadership in Taipei deemed — correctly — that anti-Communism would no longer be as strong a force for cementing alliances with the West as it had been up to that point, and so Chiang Ching-kuo began slowly to loosen the reins of the dictatorship which had theretofore been largely successful in repelling domestic calls for social liberalization and eventually democracy. In 1987, the 38 long years of Martial Law came to an end, and with it the White Terror period. Thus, Taiwan became one of the nations that threw off the shackles of authoritarianism in the Third Wave of democratization that swept the globe.

This democratization, along with the nation's impressive economic growth — known as the Taiwan Miracle — served to create the conditions wherein rapid changes to the social structure and society's values would take place. In the wake of the lifting of Martial Law, Taiwan saw enormous changes in almost all respects, including the growth of a civil society, the widespread acceptance of Western liberal values, a thriving political environment wherein leaders vie for votes to represent their constituencies, and most recently, a deep belief among young people in social justice to the point where they are willing to take to the streets to protest unconstitutional actions on the part of government representatives (Blundell, 2012). Compared to the social landscape just three decades ago, it is a completely different Taiwan.

Yet despite these fundamental changes, the security situation across the Taiwan Strait remains tense. The PRC is still intent on annexing Taiwan and has yet to renounce the use of force as a means to that end. An estimated 1,600 missiles of the PLA Rocket Force (formerly the Second Artillery

Corps) stand arrayed along China's southern coast, targeted squarely on Taiwan. The faceoff across the strait is a product of the Cold War international order, and while the Cold War itself has long since ended, the situation in the Taiwan Strait remains very much the same, with the threat from China ever-present.

The weapons used by Beijing to coerce Taipei into rapprochement have changed as China's economic and military might have grown in recent decades. Whereas once, the PLA was essentially a large, technically unsophisticated standing army geared toward defense of China's vast territory and the subjugation of its peoples, the PRC's rapid economic growth has enabled the purchase (and theft through espionage) of advanced weapons systems and technologies which have seen the PLA become a high-tech fighting force, and the PLA Navy (PLAN) shift its focus on coastal defense to adopt not-so-far-fetched ambitions of one day fielding a blue-water navy.

Moreover, following the doctrine of Unrestricted Warfare first enunciated by PLA colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, China has succeeded in creating the conditions whereby its economic and supply-chain integration with the economy of Taiwan can be used as a weapon to coerce capitulation. In addition to the economic sphere, Chinese attempts to effect rapprochement on Beijing's terms take the form of manipulation in a number of fields, including ethnocultural (promoting the idea that the Taiwanese people are descendants of Yan and Yellow Emperor), sophisticated electronics (PLA hackers are constantly launching cyberattacks on the Taiwan government and corporate websites and servers, often as a means to test out new techniques before using them on targets in the United States), and covert espionage (Chinese intelligence operatives have managed to turn many current and former military members, as well as civilians), among others.

Moreover, the situation has become increasingly complicated as the ROC military's erstwhile patron, the KMT, which was once seen as the anti-Communist party, has in recent years become the party most committed to eventual unification with Communist China. From 2008 to 2016, under a KMT administration, the door has been opened to thousands of Chinese tourists visiting Taiwan, direct flights have begun plying the airways between the two countries, and several trade deals have been signed.²

So there exists a situation in which Taiwan society has moved forward, both economically as well as politically, from dictatorship, through democratization, and into a truly open and free society dedicated to fairness and equality, and yet the security situation remains unchanged, with the threat of invasion ever-present. As a result, the military tasked with confronting this threat has remained one of the largest social organs on the island resistant to change. Much has been made of the military culture in the ROC armed forces, how it is risk-averse and resistant to change. Yet change it must, if it is truly going to represent – as well as once again play an integral part in – the society it defends. ROC leaders understand that such change is necessary, and in an effort to remake the military into a social institution more in line with modern Taiwan society, an effort was launched in 2008 to transition to an All-Volunteer Force (AVF). Unfortunately, this effort failed, and during the eight years of the President Ma Ying-Jeou administration, recruitment targets and deadlines for completion have consistently gone unmet (McCauley, 2016, p. 6). This volume argues that, while the AVF transition is the wrong goal, the instinct for change and modernization is essentially correct. Thus the challenge faced by Taiwan's leaders is to establish a blueprint for a rebranded ROC military that continues to form a credible defense against China yet reflects the modern-day realities of contemporary Taiwan. In

order to solve this problem, an assessment first must be made of the current state of the ROC military. Fortunately, military sociologists have developed tools for just such an assessment.

THE POSTMODERN MILITARY MODEL

The postmodern military model (PMMM) identifies three distinct stages in military transformation: the modern stage, the late modern stage, and the postmodern stage. Within this approach, each stage is described and identified using 11 dimensions (see Table 1). In the dimension of threat perception, for example, a modern (pre-Cold War/1900–1945) military faces the threat of invasion by the standing army of an enemy state. A late modern (Cold War/1945–1990) military faces the threat of nuclear war. A postmodern (post-Cold War/since 1990) military faces challenges such as terrorism, ethnic conflict, and other sub-national threats. In each of the 11 dimensions, the military of each stage is measurably different from the previous stage.

Very often in Taiwan, when a new government initiative or institutional body needs to be created, there is a tendency to look abroad for a template that can be applied. Due to its close historical relationship to Taiwan, especially during the post-war era, the United States often serves as the source of that template, such as the ROC National Communications Commission.³ While this example is a relatively successful example of such transplantation, others have not fared so well. Moreover, the situation regarding the military is quite different. It has been suggested that the American experience of ending conscription in the early 1970s was the model, or at least the inspiration, for President Ma's desire to do the same in Taiwan. While the concluding chapter goes into more detail as to why this is a mistaken assessment, suffice it

to say here that the differences between the conditions of the two militaries are sufficiently wide that the one serves as a poor example for the other. The PMMM is an ideal tool with which to measure those differences and hence demonstrate the lack of applicability of the US example. As this research shows, there are significant differences in culture, circumstances, geopolitical currents, and other divergent factors that show the American example to be one that is not directly applicable to implementation in Taiwan.

Having said that, *the time is also ripe for a change*. Yet, the ROC military brass does not necessarily share this view. Indeed, one of the criticisms that has been levied against ROC military leaders is that they are highly cautious, conservative, and risk-averse (Tucker, 2005, p. 157). Nevertheless, change there must be, as a recent case involving the death of a conscript due to harsh punishment at the hands of his superior officers demonstrates. One must ask the question, what is the place of the military in Taiwan society? That is an essential question that this book will endeavor to clarify.

In order to understand the place of the ROC military in Taiwan society, this research was aimed at studying the impact of self-identification on a variety of perceptions of the ROC military, and to what degree the beliefs of Taiwan citizens about the ROC armed forces are colored by the way they identify ethnically, as either Chinese or Taiwanese (中國人或 台灣人). The question of identity, and the various ways that are expressed, is central to any understanding of Taiwan society, and thus aspects of identity such as ethnic self-identification, as well as the associated issues of political party identification and vision of the future of Taiwan (especially as regards the independence vs unification issue), are of paramount importance in any discussion of Taiwan society. They are therefore of no less importance in determining the state of civil–military relations in the country.

Ultimately, this volume is intended to provide policy-makers within the ROC government and military with an understanding of the current military–society relationship, so that they may proceed with their efforts to create a more accountable military. This is an especially urgent problem given the ROC government’s policy goal of shifting to a professional military. Should that goal be pursued to completion, then the task of enticing the nation’s best and brightest high-school graduates to choose a career in the armed forces will become all the more difficult, especially if the current low levels of morale continue to exist in the ranks. Before policy-makers and officers can expect to be able to address the AVF issue, they need to understand the root causes of the schism that exists between military and society. The practical outcomes of research such as this will be important in that endeavor. Moreover, the outcomes of this research may also help theorists gain a better understanding of the dynamics of the famously elusive Taiwan identity.

This study is designed to have direct practical value to ROC military officers and government policymakers, especially those charged with charting the ideological course of the ROC armed forces. As it stands now, troop morale is low, and the public distrusts the neutrality of the armed forces (Swaine & Mulvenon, 2001, p. 75). The training regimen and prevalent ideology within the army may be a contributor to this phenomenon, as it potentially clashes with the ethnic loyalties of its members. Changing the ideological imprint of a large organization is a difficult prospect at best, and at worst an impossible undertaking. Moreover, the plan suffers from a lack of public interest, exacerbated by memories of the island’s militarized past, which conspire to stand in the way of effective military reform and development (Setzekorn, 2014).

However, if sufficient political capital can be harnessed – building upon initial efforts to transfer over to a professional military – then it may provide a unique opportunity to implement scientifically valid processes, right at the beginning, thus laying a foundation upon which the new military structure can build a healthy, effective fighting force that is in lockstep with the society it protects. Now is the time to undertake a thorough examination of conditions in the ROC military and society, determine the best course of action, and follow it.

In addition to being of direct practical value, this book offers theoretical and conceptual contributions as well. Understanding the link between ethnic identification and perceptions of a large social institution such as the military has value beyond just a military setting, as well as in countries other than Taiwan. The dynamics in play are not unlike those in several other countries around the world: specifically, ethnic identification in a nonhomogeneous society. Moreover, the study's conclusions include the observation that while Taiwan's military scores in the higher level in some of the PMMM dimensions, it scores in the lower level in many others. Far from disqualifying the model as an analytical tool, it enhances its usefulness. The way the model has been employed to measure Taiwan's military–society relationship may be used in other countries as well that do not themselves follow the Western pattern of development, but rather may be closer to what Taiwan has experienced.

NOTES

1. This practice was employed initially by Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo as a means of ensuring loyalty to the KMT at a

time when Communist agents and sympathizers routinely infiltrated the ranks of the armed forces, and entire frontline units have been known to have defected to the PRC.

2. These include the controversial Cross-Strait Agreement on Trade in Services and the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), which has led to a drop in trade and a slide in Taiwan's trade surplus with China (Turton, 2016b).

3. The ROC National Communications Commission was formed in 2006, and was directly patterned on the US Federal Communications Commission.