

Taiwan's Military Exercise: A Difficult Journey towards Credibility

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Abstract

Despite some improvements in the latest Han Kuang 31 Exercise, Taiwan still has various difficulties in achieving credibility for its deterrence against China.

Steps towards the Reality

Since 1984, the annual Han Kuang series of exercises has been an indicator of Taipei's comprehensive effort on joint operations for various scenarios of the island defense [1]. This series of exercises were sometimes criticized for merely shows of firepower due to lack of reality, but several features in the exercise this year signify major changes [2].

Firstly, the more comprehensive integration between military and civilian sectors reflects the real nature of small state defence. As a small island (about 36000 km²) with a strait of 120 to 180 km away from the second strongest military power in the world, the latter's threats on the former are more than military, and the former's overall efforts are necessary for its survival. With a number of long-range weapon systems, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) can effectively project its firepower on Taiwan, and there would be no clear boundary between frontline and safe zone. As a result, all governmental departments have to cope with warfare. Furthermore, since the crises in the Taiwan Strait in 1996 and 1999, Beijing created a new strategy of "three kinds of warfare": psychological warfare, legal warfare, warfare of public opinion against Taipei, the former has a range of tools to make synergy on the latter [3]. Additionally, due to Taiwan's a series of open policies to China since 2008, there are various channels including tourism, education, business, and marriage, for Chinese people to visit and even reside in Taiwan, and thus penetration of a number of special operation forces is possible. An armed conflict cross the Strait could be a synthetic campaign rather than a conventional military battle. Before this year, the Han Kuang exercises were concentrated on the military sphere, but all related civilian governmental departments, such as the ministry of foreign affairs and the central bank, are included into the war game of the Han Kuang 31. In addition to attendance, some emergency measures such as reallocating budgets and foreign-exchange reserves for defence purpose, strengthening defense of key facilities to prevent sabotage were practiced. Irregular means, such as cyber attack, is listed in the scenario as well [4]. Undeniably, the extent of integration among government departments during the exercise is uncertain to public, perhaps with a considerable room to improve, but at least it reveals specific changes in defense planners' minds.

Secondly, some crucial units were realistically deployed to tactical positions. Due to the threats of Chinese ballistic and cruise missiles as well as sabotage, Taiwan's fighters may not be available for air defence and surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) would be strategically crucial to deny China's establishing air superiority. However, their fixed locations would be fragile to land attack missiles and other forms of strike as well, so that mobile deployment is important for survival during wartime. However, Taiwan's SAM units were rarely deployed out of their regular bases during exercises until the Han Kuang 31. Several SAM units, including launchers, radar, command post and other facilities, moved to potential tactical locations, where was not open to

journalists. Thirdly, wider mobilisation is conducted in the exercise. In the previous exercises, reserved soldiers are usually mobilised to form defense-oriented infantry units to hold coastal lines and wait for main strike units, such as tanks and attack helicopters, to launch counterattacks. This year, besides original missions, some mobilised reserved soldiers are assigned to deal with repairing runways, a more strategic function than holding coastal lines. Paramilitary units, such as coast guard, are also shifted to under the command of the navy, as civilian vehicles were mobilised as well [5].

Structural Limitations

Despite those improvements, several issues would obstacle Taiwan's defence transformation. Firstly, the military human source is still uncertain. Due to the insufficient recruitment of voluntary soldiers, the plan of transformation into all-voluntary force (AVF) has postponed once more and the one-year conscription will be extended at least another year. However, as long as the AVF is still a popular policy with people, politicians would continue the pursuit for such a transformation. On the one hand, recruitment would be more difficult in the upcoming trend of low birth rate and many fragile young people of the "strawberry" generation may fail to pass training. Poor recruitment may lead to slashing size of the armed forces, which is concurrently conducting, or insufficient supply of human power, which would deteriorate operational readiness. On the other hand, the planned four months of basic military training for male citizens may be insufficient due to lack of operation experience in large units or exercise. In short, the present plan for AVF may affect regular and reserve troops [6].

Secondly, China's penetration into Taiwan will still be likely. As none of the major presidential candidates dare to mention reducing cross-Strait integration, Chinese capital and people will at least be as free as nowadays to visit Taiwan in the foreseeable future. Thus, deploying a considerable number of special operation troops with certain level of support would be feasible for Beijing [7]. The Chinese "fifth column" can carry out assassination for decapitation operation, disrupting war preparation, intelligence and other missions. For example, mobile deployed SAM units could be easily ambushed by PLA's penetrated

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troops. The endless espionage cases also pose another serious challenge for Taipei to manage its defense parallel with its broad engagement with Beijing [8].

Thirdly, the popular resolve to defend Taiwan might be questionable. During the Han Kuang 31, there were some people complaining about the noise of exercise and requested removing a major military training site. They even use some Quisling-like politicians' attendance in the military parade in Beijing this month to doubt the meaning of defense for Taiwan. Certainly, such voice may not represent the majority of the population, but the general preference for the AVF reveals the public reluctance to participate into defense. According to Clausewitz, war is a clash of will, and Taiwan may be in an inferior position to China [9].

Finally, Taiwan's military modernisation is incomplete and has been even sluggish since 2008 due to a decreasing number of major projects. Since the 1970s, Taipei has taken a selective style of military modernisation for the units with strategic values such as fighters, SAMs, as the rest have to hold on with aging equipment until surplus budget available. Hence, more and more equipment could not be replaced or upgrade in time [10]. From the mid-2000s, defense investment was further disrupted by domestic political struggle, peaceful attitude toward China and the high financial burden for the transformation to AVF [11]. Thus, there are various antique assets in service in Taiwan, such as the World War II era landing ships, submarines, howitzers, not to mention other stuff of the Cold War era [12]. The accumulating collection of obsolete equipment is like a snowball which is getting larger. With a worsening financial condition due to expanding social welfare and aging population, it is unlikely for Taipei to completely modernise its armed forces and those weapons of "grandparents" or "parents" generation would be still deployed to counter China.

In summary, after seven years of unprecedented friendly attitude toward Beijing, the Han Kuang 31 Exercise with relatively realistic

practices demonstrates Taipei's intention to achieve some credibility in its deterrence against the former. However, the AVF issue, unstable public resolve for defence, insufficient military modernisation and the increasing cross-Strait integration erode Taiwan's general deterrence against China. All four constraints are relevant to the island's special political, economic and social context, which will be continuously influential in the foreseeable future.

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