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Taiwan's Defence: Towards an All-Volunteer Military?

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Synopsis

Taiwan's transformation from conscription to all-volunteer system has not been successful. This could weaken its defence situation.

Commentary

THE MINISTRY of national defence (MND) in Taipei has encountered a number of difficulties in recruiting professional soldiers to supplement the manpower gap left by the termination of compulsory military service. The MND's latest report to the Congress reflects a low level of recruitment, achieving just 30% of its goal, last year.

In the infantry and armour units, the recruitment rates are even lower at 4% and 16% respectively. As a result, the MND has postponed the start of full transformation by two years, ie 2016. Some relevant policies such as increasing salary and relaxing requirements are proposed by the MND to attract more young men to join the armed forces.

Danger of all-voluntary military

However, the MND's attempts towards an all-volunteer military that will not be likely to succeed would undermine Taiwan's defence capacity and capability in several ways.

In terms of budget, the rising costs of manpower have come at the expense of other defence expenditures. As Taiwan's whole defence budget has not significantly increased, a larger portion allocated to manpower costs, from 40% to 54%, is tantamount to reducing the resources for maintenance, training and investment, which are crucial for defence. In the face of China's expanding military capacity and strengthening capabilities, Taiwan with its relatively low defence budget (less than 3% GDP in the last decade), has put itself in an inferior position in the military dynamics across the Strait.

Although the MND has somehow adjusted its military strategy to asymmetrical operations through denial means, such as anti-ship missiles and stealth missile craft, reaching credible deterrence still requires proper military procurement, sufficient training and exercises. From the poor performance and some incidents such as air crash in military exercises in the recent years, cutting training and maintenance expenditure would be a negative factor for Taiwan's defence.

In addition, the MND would need to replace or upgrade a wide variety of outdated weapon systems still in service, such as those manufactured during the Vietnam War, and even the Second World War era, to achieve operational readiness.

Moreover, adding some capabilities such as cruise missiles to counter China's military superiority also requires adequate investment. Thus, Taipei's unilateral reduction of its budget for maintenance, training and investment in the armed forces, due to the shifting of resources towards an all-voluntary force, would worsen its military imbalance vis-à-vis Beijing.

Total defence force

In strategic terms, Taiwan is different from other countries having all-volunteer military systems: they do not face a high probability of warfare. With its shallow strategic depth and China's formidable long-distance strike capabilities the whole of Taiwan, including the entire population, would be turned to a battlefield during wartime.

For its security and survival, a total people's participation in defence would be necessary: an all-volunteer military would not be very meaningful as most male citizens would still have to take at least four months of military training. In most cases of shifts towards all-volunteer military systems such as in NATO member states, these occurred in a relatively peaceful era.

The most persuasive reason in favour of an all-volunteer military for Taiwan, its short term of conscript servicemen of about one year, is inadequate for full training. Longer-term contract should solve this problem. Nevertheless, for several reasons, the MND have difficulties in attracting enough young people to solve the shortage of manpower.

Firstly, despite the relatively good salary, a series of scandals including espionage, sexual harassment and murder have considerably damaged the reputation of the armed forces. For example, the murder case of a corporal who was bullied to death last year has provoked several massive protests against the MND.

Thus, in spite of the relatively peaceful atmosphere in the Taiwan Strait, military careers are somehow considered risky. Other internal management issues, such as bureaucratism and factionalism, have been publicly known through the many negative experiences of servicemen. With those drawbacks, military careers would not be an attractive option for young people.

Furthermore, the shrinking numbers of the young generation due to the low birth rate since the 1980s have reduced the recruitment: this issue will become more serious in the near future. Finally, the civil administration would be unlikely to provide additional funding for the MND for extra income incentives because it is struggling with financial difficulty due to the declining economy and extensive welfare issues.

Unpopular issue

Since the democratisation of politics in the 1990s, the conscript system has been an unpopular issue in Taiwan. During his presidential campaign, the incumbent President Ma Ying-jeou had promised to do away with it. With the political concerns of the Ma administration, the MND would keep attempting to transform the military into an all-volunteer force.

However, the ministry's attempts seem unlikely to succeed due to structural reasons, and the MND will face a resource dilemma between adopting an all-voluntary force and substantially fortifying Taiwan's defence, at least until 2016. In the meanwhile, Taiwan would lose precious time to fully review its defence needs even as China achieve greater military superiority over Taiwan.

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