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Taiwan's Continued Conscription: An Unresolved Problem

By Wu Shang-su

Synopsis

Taiwan's delayed transformation to an all-volunteer force (AVF) would not be a turning point for conscription, but signify its weakening defence.

Commentary

CONTRARY TO its plan to abolish compulsory military service by the end of this year, the Ministry of National Defence (MND) in Taipei has announced the enlistment of about 23,100 young male citizens next year, due to insufficient recruitment of volunteer soldiers - after the first failure in transformation to an all-volunteer force (AVF) in 2013.

The MND also mentioned the possibility of further conscription thereafter. This temporary decision not only reflects Taiwan's dilemma in its continuous attempt at introducing the all-volunteer force (AVF), but may also create a weakness in its capability for general deterrence, particularly in hybrid warfare scenario.

Vulnerability in hybrid warfare

Despite the current failure in recruitment, the MND still plans to carry out its AVF policy which may narrow Taiwan's security margin. To lower the difficulty of recruitment, the MND plans to slash the total size of the armed forces from the present 215,000 troops to between 170,000 and 175,000 during peace time. Such a smaller number would be a key factor of reaching MND's manpower requirement.

As conscripts are mainly for ground troops rather than air force or navy, transforming the AVF would mostly affect such units. While conventional wisdom has it that the air force and navy are far more critical than ground troops in island defence, this notion has been reversed and the importance of ground troops raised due to the possibility of irregular or hybrid warfare.

Thanks to Taipei's open policy towards Beijing since 2008, China has various channels to deploy its special operation units and other forces under civilian cover, such as tourists, students and business people, into Taiwanese territory in advance of operation. Those Chinese "fifth column" could paralyse key facilities and other missions to create better conditions for regular invasion or other forms of

intervention.

As a result, Taiwan's group troops are critical to counter such scenarios, and their quantity would considerably be related to their performance, especially when their opponents could be much more than before.

Under cover of more than three million Chinese visitors annually, it would not be a surprise to find thousands or even tens of thousands of People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers penetrating Taiwan. Unlike regular warfare, such scenarios would not allow the MND to have sufficient time to mobilise reservist soldiers to achieve quantitative superiority, and the regular forces would be the only means of responding.

Downsizing them to fit the AVF goal may make the defender lose quantitative advantage, or even regionally outnumbered by the PLA forces without landing or airborne invasion. If Taiwan's ground troops were unable to control the situation, its other defence capabilities would be unlikely to perform effectively, or may even get neutralised by sabotage or other forms of attack.

Weak general deterrence

Due to the relatively slow and small military procurement, the general military balance between Beijing and Taipei, especially naval and aerial capabilities, has been tilted toward China. As Taiwan's deterrence against China on air and maritime defence is being undermined, land defence, particularly urban warfare, would be crucial to supplement its general deterrence. As such, a large number of citizen soldiers are an important element for homeland defence, and demonstrate the credibility of defence will.

Although the MND also plans four-month basic training for male citizens parallel to the AVF, without the experience of large-scale, joint training or exercise, this would significantly constrain their operational flexibility. Moreover, as China is building up its military capability, Taiwan's building down with less popular participation may send a message to Beijing about Taipei's reducing defence will.

Taiwan identity and conscription

The Sunflower Movement last year and the high school students' protest on their curricula this year showed that the Taiwan identity -- with Taiwanese people seeing themselves as independent from China -- seems to be increasingly popular, particularly among youth, based on a number of recent polls.

However, such a shift in national identity, which may cause Beijing to use force against Taipei, has not led to a popular review of the conscription issue. If people in Taiwan really want to defy the second strongest military power in the world for their self-determination, the resolve for self-defence would be indispensable. According to Taiwan's short strategic depth and China's expanding long-range firepower, warfare across the Strait would involve not only professional soldiers but the entire population on the island.

Hence, military preparedness should be relevant to such a political situation. Yet, after the MND's announcement, public opinion has generally merely focused on the government's failure in completing AVF, and the eroding interest of some young male citizens due to the longer enlistment.

Undeniably, Taiwan's military system has been somewhat notorious for a series of scandals, including torture, espionage and other incidents about internal management. Thus some people argue that they do want to serve in the military, certainly not in the current one. However, military reform is not the main topic, either in daily public opinion or the policy debates in the presidential election campaign.

A modified AVF policy has been mentioned by Tsai Ing-Wen, the presidential candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) with a promising opportunity to win the election next year. But there have been no details about this policy as yet. As long as public attitude toward conscription is negative, public pressure would ensure that elected decision makers in Taipei still move toward AVF. Moreover, despite the clear trend towards a Taiwan identity, the Taiwanese people's reluctance to make individual contribution to defence would put them in an inferior position vis-à-vis China.

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