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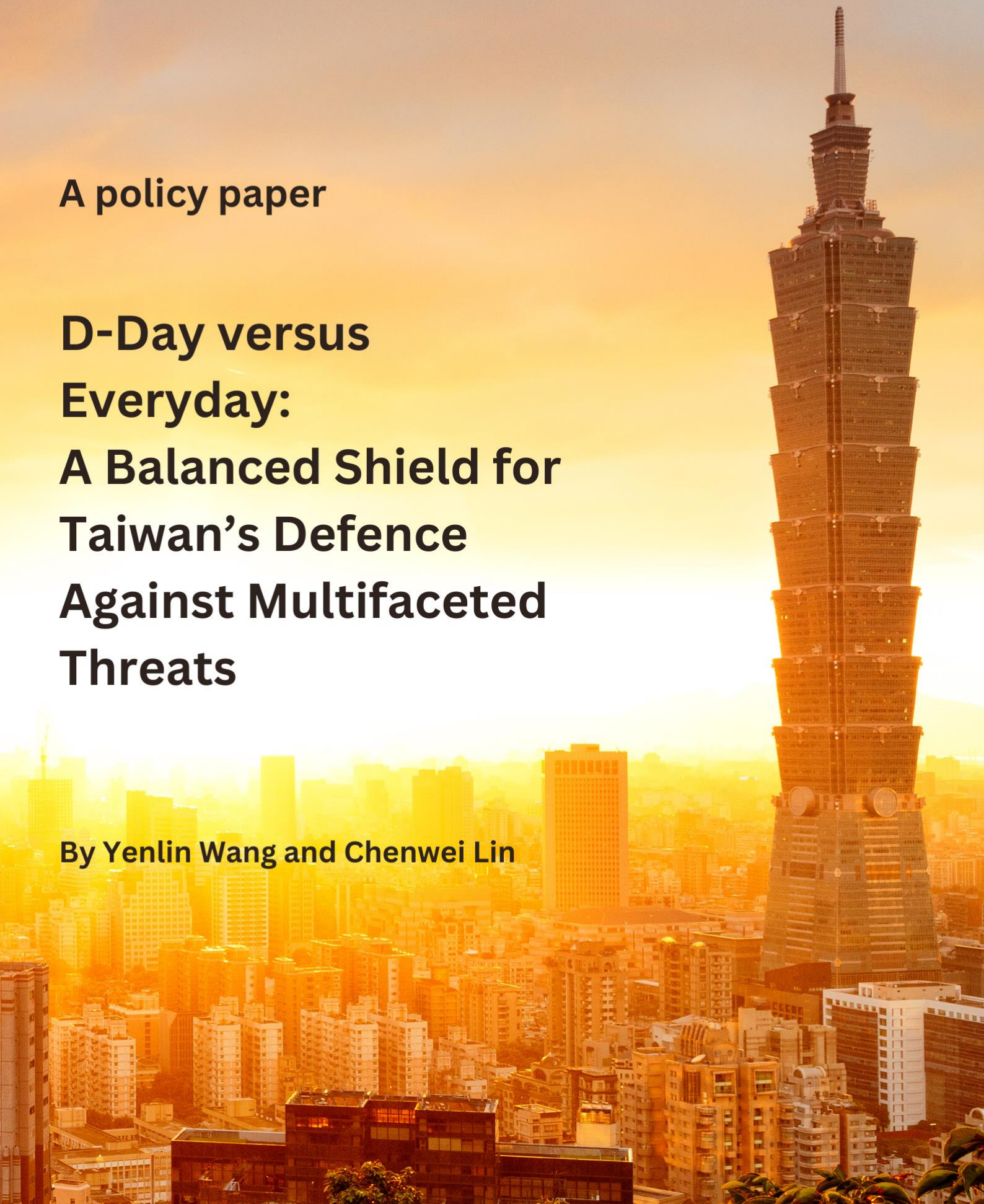
D-Day versus Everyday: A Balanced Shield for Taiwan's Defence Against Multifaceted Threats



By Yenlin Wang and Chenwei Lin

University of Nottingham
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Summary

Taiwan faces a dual and intensifying threat from the People's Republic of China (PRC): persistent "Everyday" grey-zone coercion and the looming possibility of a full-scale "D-Day" invasion. While recent reforms—guided by U.S. strategic advice—have focused heavily on asymmetric defence capabilities, this paper argues that an exclusive reliance on asymmetry is insufficient. The two threat types are operationally interlinked; a strategy overly focused on denial risks degrading Taiwan's ability to manage daily incursions, sustain public confidence, and deter broader conflict escalation.

Drawing on lessons from Ukraine and analysing Taiwan's current posture, this study concludes that a balanced defence investment strategy is essential to address this dual challenge. While asymmetric systems provide a cost-effective means of denying actual invasion, conventional capabilities—such as fighter aircraft, naval platforms, and mobile ground units—remain critical for managing grey-zone pressure and projecting deterrence. The following policy recommendations are proposed:

• Preserve and strengthen survivable asymmetric capabilities for "D-Day" denial, including drones, missiles, sea mines, and distributed command-and-control nodes.
• Sustain selected conventional forces, especially Class II naval platforms and air assets, to support grey-zone responses and maintain visible deterrence.
• Reform doctrine and training to integrate joint operations, cognitive warfare countermeasures, and realistic grey-zone engagement protocols.
• Accelerate procurement efficiency and address U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS) delivery delays to improve overall readiness.
• Deepen cooperation with like-minded partners—especially the United States, Japan, the Philippines and Australia—on interoperability, joint exercises, and maritime domain awareness.

Reassessing Taiwan's Defence Needs Amidst the Asymmetry Push

How best to defend Taiwan remains a fiercely debated question. Within the United States, the most influential school of thought over the past decade has centred on the threat of a full-scale invasion. It posits an assault beginning with a massive volley of missile and artillery strikes, followed by amphibious and airborne landings.

In this scenario, Taiwan's strategic priority would be to absorb the initial attack while preserving the capacity to launch an effective counterattack. This doctrine, therefore, mandates investment in asymmetric hardware: an arsenal of mobile, dispersible, and precise assets designed to defeat a PLA landing force along the coastline.[1] This overarching approach has been dubbed the "Porcupine Strategy."

This paper examines the strategic implications of focusing on this asymmetry. While recognising the vital role of asymmetric capabilities in deterring invasion, we argue that sidelining conventional forces risks undermining Taiwan's ability to respond to grey-zone coercion. These daily operations are not separate from full-scale invasion threats; they shape the battlefield and degrade readiness, serving as precursors to escalation.[2] Neglecting conventional capabilities could weaken deterrence against the full spectrum of PRC aggression.

To emphasise the importance of a balanced approach to defending Taiwan, this paper first examines how the PRC's threats are operationally interconnected. It then evaluates the strategic debate, assessing both the strengths and pitfalls of asymmetry, including risks such as over-reliance, reduced public confidence, and vulnerability to cognitive warfare. After this, relevant lessons from Ukraine are considered, followed by an assessment of Taiwan's current posture. The paper concludes with recommendations for a balanced investment strategy that meets the dual demands of "D-Day" and "Everyday" deterrence.

The Interlinked Threat: PRC's D-Day Potential and Everyday Coercion

The primary challenge in defending Taiwan is not merely deterring a potential full-scale invasion—a task that has long been a priority for military strategists. An equally formidable

challenge is countering malign grey-zone behaviour, which is rapidly increasing in frequency, scale, and severity. These are not separate phenomena but are, in fact, interconnected phases of a broader campaign to weaken and ultimately conquer the island. Recognising this linkage is, therefore, critical for developing effective defence planning and building a meaningful force structure.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has modernised rapidly, developing missiles, amphibious capabilities, airpower, and A2/AD systems designed for contingencies involving Taiwan.[2] A "D-Day" scenario would likely begin with joint firepower strikes using missiles and air attacks to paralyse military and civilian infrastructure, followed by efforts to establish air and sea control for large-scale landings.[3]

However, prior to the full-scale invasion, Beijing could impose a blockade or "quarantine," leveraging the Coast Guard and maritime militia to assert control without crossing the threshold into outright war.[4] These coercive tools aim to erode public confidence and weaken resistance, potentially paving the way for an invasion.

Before the blockade or "quarantine" leading to the D-Day attack, the PRC had been waging daily "Every day" grey-zone operations even as this paper is being written. These include military air and naval incursions, pressure from the CCG and PAFMM, sabotage of undersea cables,[5] cyberattacks, and cognitive warfare. Such tactics erode Taiwan's buffer space, drain readiness, and normalise PLA presence. They also function as rehearsals for future blockades, as evidenced by drills targeting "important ports and areas."[6]

As previously noted, grey-zone operations not only attrite Taiwan's military resources but also inflict profound psychological effects, often amplified by disinformation campaigns. Furthermore, these regular incursions increase the risk of miscalculation and accidental escalation. Therefore, countering these actions should not be seen as secondary to preparing for an invasion; indeed, it is an essential component of deterring that potential "D-Day."

The Strategic Debate: Balancing Asymmetry and Conventional Needs

Despite the clear necessity of integrating these two defensive imperatives, the influential "Porcupine Strategy" actually created strategic tension in Taiwan's defence planning. The asymmetric "Porcupine Strategy" was originally promoted by William S. Murray and strongly encouraged by the United States.[7]

The objective of this strategy is to make invasion prohibitively costly by dispersing and hardening assets near the littoral, utilising mobile, survivable platforms such as anti-ship and anti-air missiles, sea mines, drones, and small missile craft. This concept prioritises quantity, mobility, and cost-effectiveness to preserve force survivability.

Many excellent strategists supported this. For example, Hunzeker and Lanoszka argue that Taiwan faces a strategic trilemma: managing grey-zone provocations, deterring invasion, and doing so within tight budgets.[8] They propose minimal conventional forces for symbolic deterrence and recommend diverting investment to asymmetric systems and societal resilience. Similarly, Colby's "strategy of denial" reframes the objective as preventing PLA occupation of Taiwan's core territory—not defeating China outright.[9] His emphasis is on urban warfare readiness, national resilience, and prolonged denial through anti-air, anti-landing, and anti-ship systems.

Taiwanese military leaders also echo these strategies. Former Chief of the General Staff of Taiwan's military, Admiral Lee Hsi-Min, became a household name advocating that the Overall Defence Concept (ODC) best suited Taiwan's defence needs. ODC prioritises denial over control. Lee redefined victory as successfully preventing the adversary from establishing a foothold on the island and averting the occupation.[10] His strategy focuses on survivability, dispersed kill chains, and cost-effective area denial, embedding asymmetry into Taiwan's military doctrine for the first time.

While asymmetry must be fundamental to Taiwan's military reforms, some strategists contend that the debate should not be framed as a binary choice, citing at least three key reasons. First of all, asymmetric assets, optimised for last-ditch defence, are ill-suited for daily grey-zone responses such as air incursions or maritime shadowing. These require endurance and visibility,

roles typically fulfilled by fighter jets and surface vessels. An excessive focus on asymmetry could limit Taiwan's operational flexibility, thereby conceding strategic space during non-war periods.[11]

Secondly, a force centred solely on land denial lacks the tools to manage blockades or distant naval threats. As blockade scenarios become more plausible, a fact demonstrated by recent PLA exercises, Taiwan's ability to contest maritime coercion independently becomes vital—particularly if external assistance is delayed due to political reasons. Asymmetric systems alone are insufficient to meet this challenge.

Finally, an excessive and highly publicised focus on asymmetric warfare, especially concepts involving protracted urban resistance using dispersed civilian-based forces, can be weaponised by PRC cognitive warfare campaigns.[12] Graphic portrayals of inevitable destruction may erode morale, instil defeatism, and reduce public will before the conflict even begins. While the "small defeating large" narrative may inspire confidence during the conflict, the intangible nature of dispersed systems alone would fail to reassure the public beforehand. By contrast, the visible presence of jets and warships could offer more tangible signals of strength. A lack of public confidence could trigger political pressure to reduce defence spending, weakening deterrence and emboldening adversaries.

Again, although asymmetry must guide Taiwan's military modernisation, conventional forces remain more than relevant. Even Admiral Lee Hsi-Min affirms that a high-quality core of conventional platforms is indispensable.[13] Taiwan continues to rely on fighter aircraft and naval vessels to assert sovereignty and manage incursions, but this imposes a strain on equipment and personnel readiness.[14] This issue becomes even more acute when examining Taiwan's limited fleet.[15]

A significant shortfall is Taiwan's lack of Class II Ships (1,000–3,000 tons), forcing it to deploy larger and more valuable vessels to confront smaller PRC grey-zone craft, such as the 1,400-ton Type 056. This mismatch is inefficient and potentially escalatory. (See Table 1.) The absence of appropriately sized platforms limits Taiwan's ability to sustain effective grey-zone responses.

Table 1

Active Destroyers, Frigates, and Missile Boats of the Taiwan Navy

	Ship Classification (number of ships)	Displacement (Tons)
Class I Ships (>3,000 tons, Equivalent to Major Surface Combatants)	Kee Lung-class destroyers (4)	10,500
	Cheng Kung-class frigate (10)	4,104
	Kang Ding-class frigate (6)	3,680
	Chih Yang-class frigate (5)	4,256
Class II Ships (3,000~1,000 tons)	None	
Class III Ships(<1,000 ton, Equivalent to Minor Surface Combatants)	Ching Chiang-class patrol ship(6)	738
	Tuo Chiang-class corvette (7)	600
	Kuang Hua VI-class missile boat (31)	186.5

Source: ROC Ministry of National Defence website.[16]

Critics argue that surface combatants may not survive PLA first strikes. While survivability concerns are valid, they do not negate the need for partial sea control, particularly in counter-blockade efforts or securing vital sea lanes. With adaptation and dispersion, these assets can potentially retain wartime utility.

Conventional forces also play vital roles in full-scale defence. With improved air defence and hardened critical infrastructures, some of the upgraded F-16Vs could survive.[17] They can then challenge air superiority, disrupt strikes, and target invasion fleets. Surface combatants can support beach defence and command functions. Submarines offer asymmetric disruption of high-value naval targets.[18] These are not supplementary but integral components of multi-domain defence.

This paper does not advocate unchecked investment in conventional arms at the expense of asymmetry. Rather, a balanced force structure—combining modern conventional and survivable asymmetric elements—is essential. Conventional forces enhance "multi-domain deterrence" by projecting capability and intent, complementing the hidden strength of denial-oriented systems.

Future PRC tactics may defy expectations. A purely asymmetric force might be ill-equipped for distant blockades or unconventional grey-zone moves. Conversely, traditional forces alone are vulnerable and cost ineffective. Therefore, a mixed and balanced approach offers adaptable options across conflict scenarios, from daily grey-zone skirmishes to full-scale invasions.

The core tension remains that asymmetric systems are cost-effective for "D-Day" denial, while conventional assets are indispensable for managing "Everyday" coercion. However, current strategy-resource alignment is often time inconsistent, with continued investments in debated platforms and excessive reliance on expensive aircraft for routine tasks.

To achieve a balanced strategy—one that retains certain conventional forces, such as fighter aircraft and vessels—Taiwan must secure clearer strategic alignment, establish more sustainable daily responses, and transparently articulate how each capability contributes to the overall defence effort. This is especially crucial amid consistent U.S. calls for increased asymmetric investments.

Ukraine: Relevance for Taiwan's Balanced Approach

As the largest ongoing conventional war in recent years, many experts have argued that the Ukraine conflict offers timely and relevant lessons for Taiwan's defence planning. However, this perspective requires careful qualification. Before such lessons can be applied, it is crucial to first analyse the fundamental structural differences that distinguish Taiwan's geostrategic environment from Ukraine's.

First, Ukraine is a continental country and borders its adversary, Russia. In contrast, Taiwan is an island where surrounding maritime conditions for conflict vary dramatically depending on the season. For example, a large-scale invasion during mid-winter, a parallel to Russia's timing, would face a greatly reduced probability of success because key maritime factors like sea state, high winds, torrential rain, and low visibility are all drastically worse during the winter monsoon season. Consequently, a massed armoured onslaught for invasion, or even the use of short-range First Person View (FPV) drones to counter it, is contingent entirely upon the success of an initial amphibious assault. This implies fundamental differences in how asymmetric capabilities must be applied.

Secondly, Ukraine was able to receive large-scale, overland military aid even after hostilities began, while Taiwan, an island, could become a truly strategic isolate during a war. Even if third parties attempt to supply support via Taiwan's eastern coastline, the island's limited cross-island logistical capacity could prevent timely deployment to the main western battlefront. Furthermore, asymmetric capabilities alone cannot hold ground or establish any frontlines. The viability of conventional forces after surviving initial strikes will depend heavily on Taiwan's pre-war force posture and its overall survivability when under direct attack.

Despite these significant structural differences, several tactical and operational lessons from the Ukraine conflict are still highly pertinent to Taiwan's defence. Foremost among these are the insights gained regarding the application of asymmetric warfare. Asymmetric systems—such as Man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS), anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM), and drones—proved effective in the early stages, inflicting heavy losses on a larger adversary. Their integration with artillery operations, especially the use of drones for targeting, demonstrated

the value of mobile, cost-effective denial tools.

In the maritime domain, Ukraine's use of anti-ship missiles and uncrewed surface vehicles for sea denial against the Russian Black Sea Fleet presents a compelling model for Taiwan's littoral defence.[19]

While the early stages of the Ukraine war strongly suggest that Taiwan should prioritise asymmetric investments, the conflict also reaffirmed the enduring importance of conventional forces. Tanks played a critical role in counteroffensives,[20] fighter jets contributed to long-range strikes and air defence operations, and layered air and missile defences remained essential. Throughout a protracted war, conventional capabilities remained indispensable.

What matters most is the ability to integrate the strengths of asymmetric and conventional systems, adapting rapidly to battlefield conditions. Military advantages are often short-lived. Ukraine's initial success with drone artillery integration was later offset by improved Russian electronic warfare (EW) countermeasures. This dynamic highlights the importance of innovation, tactical adaptation, and robust countermeasures.

In summary, Taiwan can draw three key implications: first, asymmetry is crucial in early denial; second, conventional systems remain vital for sustained defence; and third, institutional flexibility and innovation are essential for long-term resilience.

Taiwan's Current Posture: Capabilities and Enduring Challenges

Taiwan has taken to heart lessons from Ukraine and U.S. recommendations to prioritise asymmetric systems. While this transformation is ongoing, it must overcome several structural and political challenges.

One key area is the evolution of strategic thinking within the military. Following the end of Admiral Lee Hsi-Min's tenure, the concept of asymmetric warfare was temporarily downgraded from a strategic-level priority to a tactical-level consideration. The revival of the Overall Defence Concept (ODC) as a guiding principle—particularly in naval force development—illustrates internal deliberations around force modernisation.[21] While the inclusion of more asymmetric systems has broadened consensus, doctrine development and

training reform remain works in progress.

Securing and allocating an expanding defence budget is an ongoing task. Although defence spending stands at 2.5% of GDP—still short of the 3% goal—it has seen substantial real-term growth. Taiwan's GDP in 2024 is approximately 1.3 times larger than in 2016, and the defence budget rose from NT$365.8 billion in 2016 to NT$606.8 billion in 2024.[22] This reflects a firm commitment to enhancing capabilities. Navigating the domestic political landscape is also essential. Partisan politics will undoubtedly influence the defence budget; therefore, the DPP government will need to build a stronger social consensus to enable a robust budget.

Procurement strategy is another critical area. Taiwan employs a dual-track approach—leveraging U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and expanding Indigenous Defence Production (IDP). The IDP has yielded systems such as the Hsiung Feng missile series, Tien Kung III, minelayers, and the Indigenous Defence Submarine (IDS). Though local development faces challenges such as access to components, testing, and scaling, it strengthens defence self-reliance. Simultaneously, Taiwan remains dependent on the U.S. for advanced systems, including F-16Vs, M1A2T tanks, HIMARS, MQ-9Bs, and Harpoons. However, backlogs in FMS deliveries—estimated at US$20–22 billion—pose risks to timely force modernisation.[23]

Human capital is another central concern. Recruitment and retention remain difficult due to demographic shifts and competition with the private sector. Nonetheless, reforms are underway. Women now comprise 15% of active-duty personnel, and their participation in reservist training is increasing.[24] The reinstatement of one-year conscription, coupled with training reforms, seeks to augment total personnel strength. Enhancing reserve readiness remains a priority, alongside adapting joint operations doctrine to address emerging electronic warfare (EW) and cyber threats. Balancing grey-zone responses with training for high-end conflict is a complex but necessary task.

Managing these intertwined challenges—budget allocation, procurement, and personnel development—is vital for Taiwan to maintain a modern and resilient force. Despite the pressures of daily grey-zone activity and strategy-resource tensions, Taiwan continues to build a posture capable of addressing both "Everyday" coercion and "D-Day" scenarios.

Recommendations: Forging a Truly Balanced Shield

Effectively countering the PRC's dual-threat requires Taiwan to transcend the binary of asymmetric versus conventional forces and adopt an integrated, balanced defence posture. With the intention to raise defence spending to 3% of GDP, Taiwan has an opportunity to develop more robust capabilities. To this end, the following policy directions are recommended:

Investment Priorities: Achieving Synergy

• Solidify Asymmetric Foundations: Continue prioritising the deployment of numerous survivable, mobile, and cost-effective systems—missiles, drones, sea mines, and resilient command structures—for "D-Day" denial.

• Invest Selectively in Dual-Use Conventional Platforms: Maintain and upgrade key systems that address both grey-zone and full-scale scenarios.

– Air Power: Preserve the F-16V fleet with survivability enhancements. Explore lower-cost alternatives, such as drones or interceptors, for routine airspace patrols.

– Naval Forces: Expand agile littoral forces such as the Tuo Chiang-class, light frigates, and Indigenous Defence Submarines (IDS), especially to fill the "Class II" gap.

– Ground Forces: Focus on mobile artillery, drone warfare, and urban operations while strengthening civil-military cooperation.

• Divest Obsolete Systems: Phase out vulnerable legacy platforms to reallocate resources toward priority areas.

Doctrine, Training, and Coordination

• Enhance Jointness: Build resilient, interoperable command systems and conduct integrated operations (e.g., drone-artillery coordination, Coast Guard–Navy cooperation).

• Grey-Zone Protocols: Develop cost-efficient Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and Response Operations (ROEs) for grey-zone responses using CGA vessels, drones, and land-based systems while mitigating escalation risks.

• Realistic Training: Focus on contested scenarios with EW and cyber threats. Improve frequency and intensity of reserve training to boost relevance and readiness.

• Adaptive Military Culture: Promote innovation and empower lower echelons to overcome bureaucratic inertia. As most asymmetric platforms—such as drones—are inherently expendable, Taiwan must move away from a deeply ingrained culture that emphasises the preservation of equipment at all costs.

Procurement and Partnerships

• Streamline Procurement: Enhance domestic procurement processes and improve coordination with the U.S. to address FMS delivery backlogs. AmCham Taiwan has noted that recent changes in Taiwan's offsets policy may lengthen procurement procedures.[25] This paper, therefore, recommends that the government carefully consider how to mitigate unnecessary risks arising from these changes.

• Deepen U.S.–Taiwan Defence Cooperation: Expand beyond sales to include joint training, interoperable C4ISR, doctrine development, intelligence sharing (particularly on grey-zone threats), and cyber-defence.

• Leverage Regional Partnerships: Collaborate with regional partners (e.g., Japan, the Philippines, Australia) to build shared grey-zone response capabilities and enhance regional deterrence.

• Strengthen Strategic Communication: Taiwan's recent reduction in disclosing PLA air incursions may protect reconnaissance assets, but alternative ways of exposing China's grey-zone operations internationally are needed—especially as some calls to abandon conventional platforms likely reflect differing perceptions of the Taiwan Strait's current reality.

Implementing these recommendations requires a comprehensive approach that balances near-term needs with long-term investment in systems, personnel, and institutions. While strengthening ties with the U.S. remains vital, Taiwan must also enhance self-reliance to build a credible and adaptable defence posture.

Conclusion: Securing Taiwan Through Balanced Deterrence

Taiwan faces a dual and escalating threat from the PRC that demands a defence posture beyond the binary of asymmetric versus conventional capabilities. As grey-zone coercion and conventional military threats become increasingly entangled, Taiwan must adopt a strategy that integrates both response types.[26]

This paper has argued that while a robust asymmetric posture is indispensable for "D-Day" denial, it is insufficient on its own. Conventional capabilities remain essential for managing persistent grey-zone pressure that can enable large-scale conflict.

Lessons from Ukraine underscore the value of both asymmetric and conventional tools while also emphasising the importance of adaptability. Taiwan must invest not only in platforms but also in doctrine reform, institutional innovation, and human capital to sustain long-term deterrence.

Achieving this balance will require making difficult trade-offs, improving procurement efficiency, and maintaining doctrinal coherence. Taiwan must expand its pool of appropriately sized naval platforms, reform reserve training, and align strategic messaging with actual resource allocation. While deeper U.S. cooperation remains critical, Taiwan must also focus on enhancing its resilience and clarity of purpose.

Ultimately, Taiwan's credibility as a deterrent force hinges on its ability to field a flexible, layered defence posture—one that addresses both "D-Day" and "Everyday" threats coherently and sustainably.

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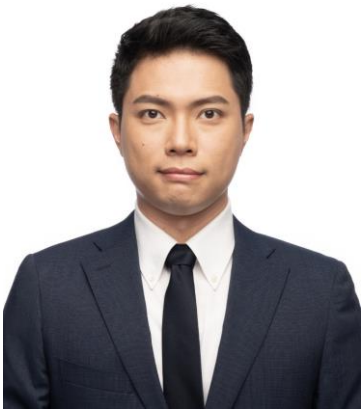
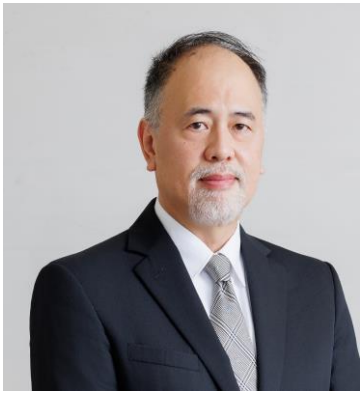
About the Authors



Dr. Yenlin Wang is a Research Fellow at the Center for Public Policy Studies at the Public Policy School of Hokkaido University (HOPS). His research and publications primarily focus on the foreign and defense policies of Japan and Taiwan, as well as energy security.
He previously served as an intelligence officer in Taiwan's Military Intelligence Bureau under the Ministry of National Defense, an Assistant Research Fellow at the Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR), and a Visiting Scholar at the University of Tokyo's Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia. He holds a PhD in Business Administration from Otemon Gakuin University.



Dr. Chen-Wei Lin is a distinguished expert in national security, defense policy, and Japan affairs with extensive experience at the senior levels of government, academia, and the non-profit sector. He is the Director of Formosa Defense Vision, an NGO dedicated to bolstering Taiwan's national resilience.
Dr. Lin's impactful government service includes five years as a Senior Advisor in Taiwan's National Security Council across two administrations (2004–2008 and 2019–2020). He also served as the Chief Executive Officer of the Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR) from 2020 to 2023. His deep expertise in regional affairs is further informed by his role as a special assistant to Taiwan's representative in Tokyo and by his academic career as a professor at Hokkaido University Public Policy School and Tokoha University. Dr. Lin holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Tokyo.