

How to Increase Public Support for Defense Budget: An Observation from Survey

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Topic: Cross-Strait Situation

1. News Highlights

President Tsai Ing-wen announced on December 27, 2022 that the length of mandatory military service will be extended to one year, in order to strengthen Taiwan's national defense. As part of the extension policy, the training period for the conscripts will be prolonged, the salary of the conscripts will be increased, and conscription periods can also count towards pension. It is reported that this armed force restructuring will be implemented in 2024, and the national defense budget will see a NT\$16 billion

increase by 2029.¹ In recent years, the United States, the European Union, and Japan have all increased their defense budgets significantly to address the growing geopolitical threats and to defend their national security.² This does not mean Taiwan has to follow suit: besides facing different threat scenarios, in democracies government budgets are not only subject to public scrutiny but also depend on public support. In this analysis, we attempt to understand people's opinion on defense budget growth through survey and explore possible ways to gain

1. For related reports, see Yang Zhiqiang and Kong Delian, "Tsai Government Pushes Important National Defense Reform: One-year Military Service, Modular Training from US Military, Civil Defense First Included in National Defense System," *The Reporter*, December 27, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/kqbY8L>.

2. For more information on Europe and the US defense budget growth, see "Military Service Extension Strengthens National Defense and Shows Taiwan's Determination to Defend Itself," *Youth Daily News*, January 3, 2023, <https://www.ydn.com.tw/news/newsInsidePage?chapterID=1556909>.

public support for the defense budget.³

2. Security Implications

In the past, opinion polls on government budget adjustments tended to frame questions in ways that led to respondent ignorance of the “crowding-out effect” of the budget, thereby resulting in unrealistic survey results. In light of this, this survey drew its inspiration from the Pew Research Center and the Reagan National Defense Survey. In the beginning of the questions, we first presented Taiwan’s current total budget and its allocations, then asked respondents whether they would like to increase, decrease, or maintain the current budgets in each category. The questions in the survey are as follows:

“According to the Executive Yuan’s 2023 central government budgeting, out

of the total budget of NT\$2.7 trillion, defense spending accounts for 14.6%; education, science, and culture spendings account for 18.2%, economic development for 17.8%, and social welfare spending for 26.3%, while community development and environmental protection account for 1.1%. Will you choose to increase, decrease or maintain the status quo for each category if you can change the allocation among them?” The next question: “If the government’s financial income is limited, which category would you prefer to increase first?” Through the questions, we sought to learn about the public’s priorities for the government’s budgetary considerations.

2-1. A more of the public support a defense budget increase

After informing the respondents of

3. The survey was conducted by Pollcracy Lab, the election research center of National Chengchi University, commissioned by the INDSR. The interviews were conducted with the LimeSurvey online polling system. The survey was conducted from November 14 to 16, 2022, among adults aged 20 years or older in Taiwan, and a total of 1,250 successful samples were completed. The actual number of cases analyzed was 1,245 after excluding invalid samples. Although the interviewees come from the database of respondents gathered from the National Chengchi University election research center, conceptually, they can be regarded as “quasi-probability samples,” and the overall bias is smaller than that of all voluntary samples. For details, see Chen-Hua Yu, “Theory and Practice of Online Public Opinion Polls,” edited by Lu-Hui Chen, *New Theory of Public Opinion Polls* (Taipei: Wunan, 2013), pp. 89-110. However, participation in the online survey is still voluntary, so the characteristics of the sample are closer to those of the group of Internet users.

the current budget allocation percentages in the “national defense,” “education, science and culture,” “economic development,” “social welfare,” and “community development and environmental protection” categories, the survey results showed that about 44% of respondents favored increasing the defense budget, 39% favored maintaining the current figure, and 17% favored decreasing it (Figure 1). Compared to other budget categories, the percentage of those favoring increase in the defense budget is not only the highest, but it is also the only category in which people in favor of the budget increase are more than those who prefer maintaining the status quo. This indicates a certain degree of public expectation for increasing defense budget.

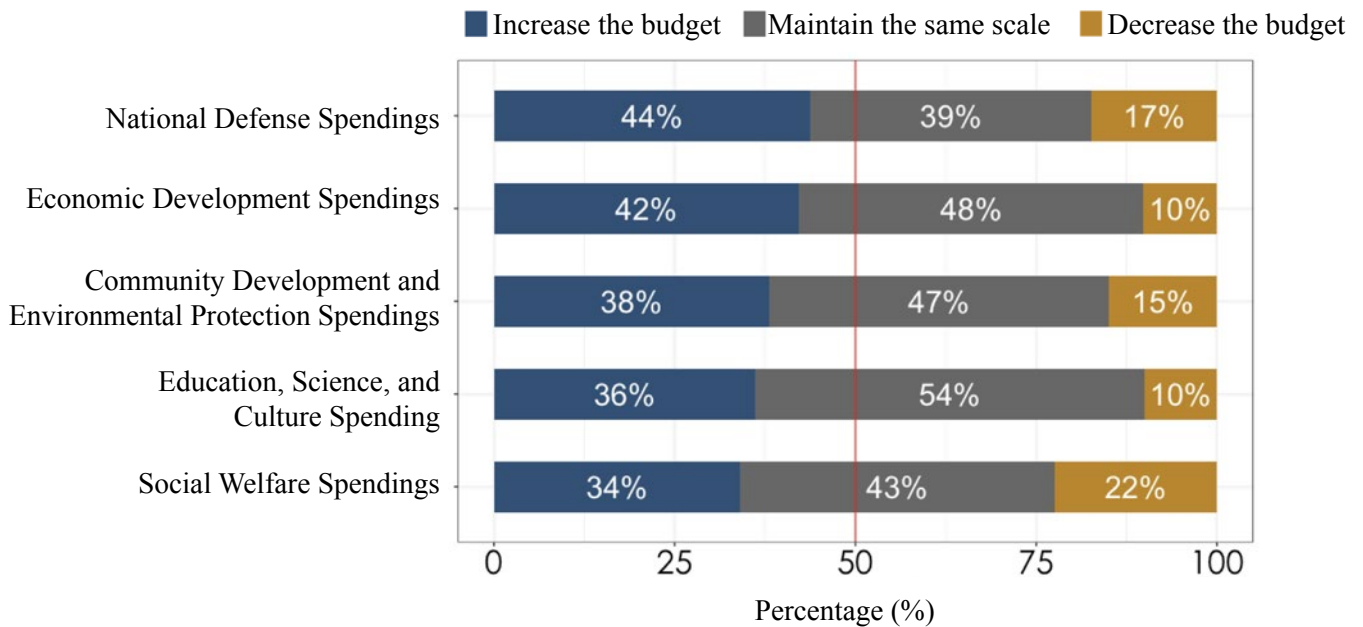
However, when further asked, “If the government has limited financial income, which budget category would you most prefer to increase?” 32% of respondents

prioritized “economic development,” with 25% for “national defense” ranked second, followed by “education, science, and culture” (17%), “social welfare” (16%), and “community development and environmental protection” (10%). The results show that the public prefers to invest resources in “economic development,” given the priority of issues and the crowding-out effect of the budget. It is not uncommon for people of different countries to prioritize livelihood or economic issues in polls. For example, the Pew Research Center found that 71% of Americans believed revitalizing the economy was the most important issue for the President and Congress, while only about 37% said that the US military power should be further strengthened.⁴ Judging from our survey results, even though the support for higher defense budget was not as high as budget for economic development, this public opinion should not be ignored.

4. “Public’s Top Priority for 2022: Strengthening the Nation’s Economy,” *Pew Research Center*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/02/16/publics-top-priority-for-2022-strengthening-the-nations-economy/>.

Figure 1: Distribution of public attitudes toward the increase or decrease of various government budget categories

If you could change the budget allocation for the above five categories, would you choose to increase, decrease or maintain the same scale?



Note: the figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.

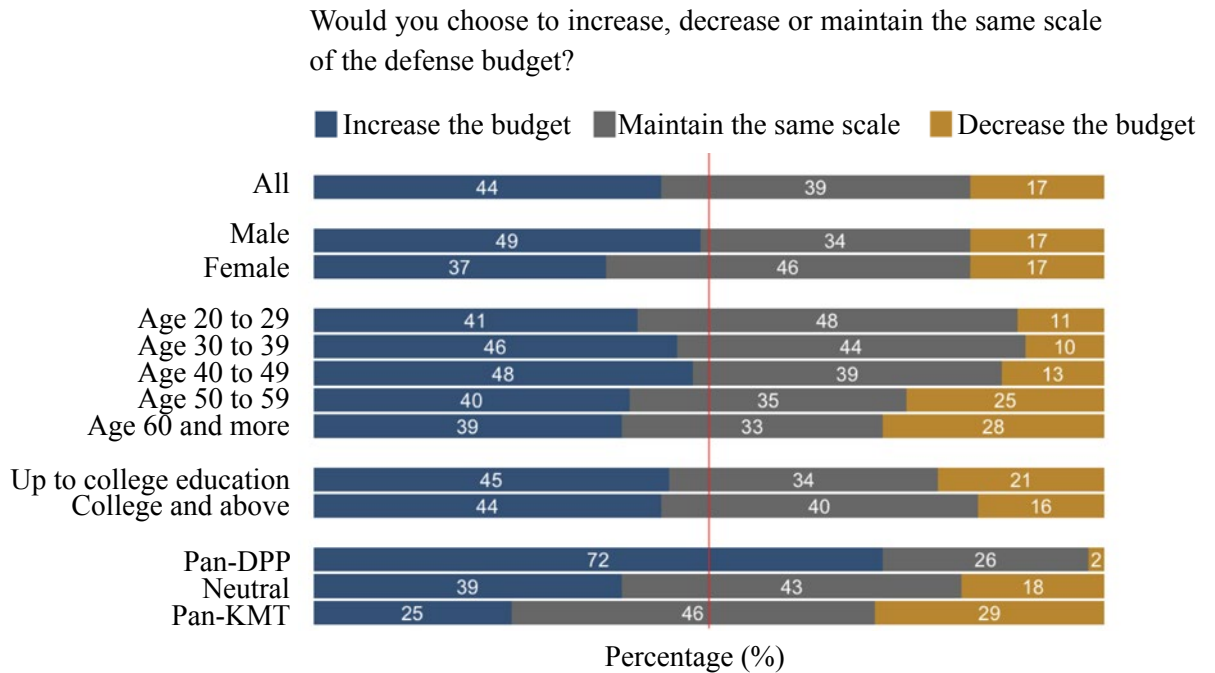
Source: Compiled by the author from the INSDR’s “Taiwan National Defense and Security Public Opinion Survey,” the fourth of the Year 2022.

2-2. The KMT-DPP political disagreement is the main cause affecting the support of the defense budget

In Figure 2, the attitudes of people from different backgrounds toward the defense budget are further analyzed. There are some differences in attitudes toward the support of the defense budget across gender and age groups. For example, about 49% of male respondents agreed with increasing the defense budget, but female supporters lagged behind at about 37%. Regarding the attitudes distributed in age groups, aged 40 to 49 showed the highest percentage of support for increase in defense budget (48%), followed by seniors aged 60 or older (39%). Although there are some slight differences in attitudes toward increasing the defense budget among different gender and age groups, the KMT-DPP political disagreement is the main factor

affecting the support for defense budget increase. Among the pan-DPP supporters, as many as 72% favor more defense budget, while only about 25% of pan-KMT supporters favor increasing it. As for those who are neutral without any specific political identification, the percentage supporting increased defense budget (39%) is also slightly lower than the average of all respondents (44%). Since more than 50% of all respondents chose to maintain the current allocation or reduce the defense budget (39% + 17%), and the main difference came from political identification, there is still no clear consensus on the growth of the budget. It is indeed difficult to cross the political gap between KMT and DPP. Yet, from the policy communication and persuasion perspective, it is still the government's inevitable responsibility to gain the majority of people's support for the defense budget.

Figure 2: Differences in attitudes toward defense budget adjustment from people of different political backgrounds



Note: the figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Source: Compiled by the author from the INSDR’s “Taiwan National Defense and Security Public Opinion Survey,” the fourth of the Year 2022.

3. Trend Observation

Past studies have shown that public perceptions of “threat” and “military strength” helped drive up defense budgets.⁵ In this section, we examine possible ways to gain cross-party support for the defense budget by inquiring about people’s threat and military strength

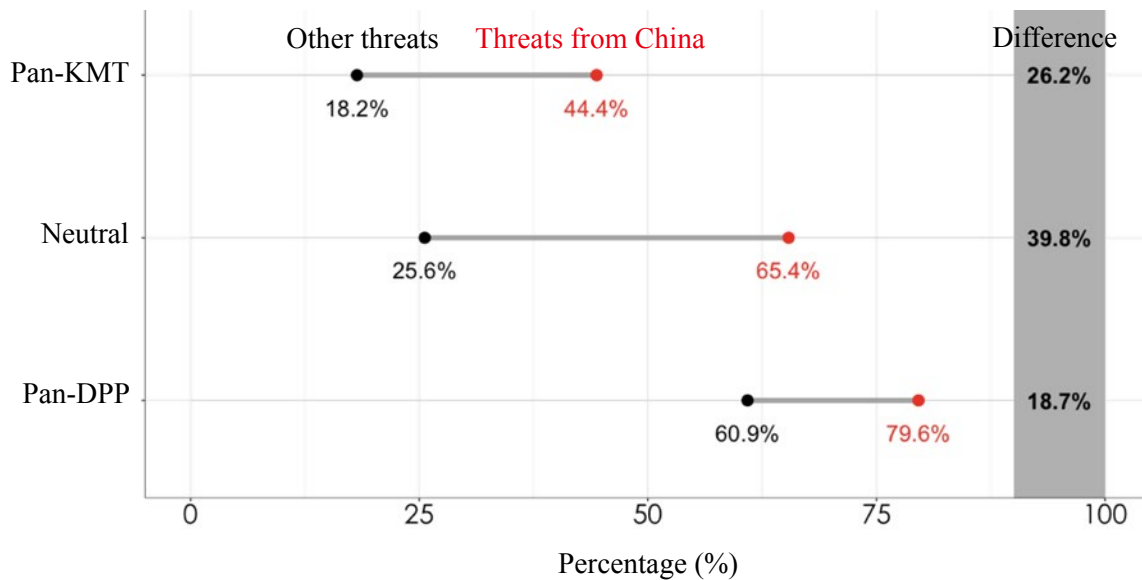
perceptions for the government’s reference.

3-1. Revealing hostile threats increases public support for defense budget

In terms of measuring “threat perception,” the survey asked respondents to identify the most serious threat to

Figure 3: Influence from “threat perception” on support for defense budget among supporters of different parties

Percentage of respondents who chose to support an increased defense budget:



Note: the figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Source: Compiled by the author from the INSDR’s “Taiwan National Defense and Security Public Opinion Survey,” the fourth of the Year 2022.

5. Erik M. Fay, “Individual and Contextual Influences on Public Support for Military Spending in NATO,” *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 31, No. 7, September 2019, pp. 762-785.

Taiwan's national security in the next five years. 39%, the highest percentage, of the respondents said the threat was from China, followed by economic stagnation (22%), the dropping birth rate (20.5%), energy shortage (13.8%), and COVID-19 (4.4%).

In Figure 3, with respondents grouped by their political identifications, the effect of "threat perception" on public support for the defense budget is examined. Among pan-KMT respondents, when some considered the primary threat to be China (red dots), their support for an increased defense budget rose to 44.4%. Compared to the pan-KMT respondents whose perceived primary threat is something else (black dots), the difference in supporting the increased defense budget becomes 26.2%. To neutral respondents without specific political preferences, the effect of "threat perception" on supporting a higher defense budget is even more pronounced. When neutrals identify China as the primary threat to Taiwan's national security, 65.4% support an increase in the defense budget, compared to 25.6% for those who prioritize other threats, with a difference of about 40%. The result demonstrates the effect of "threat perception" on public support

for the defense budget. In the past, most Taiwanese national security agencies were reluctant to publicize the threat situation as they worried that such information would create panic among the public. This approach certainly makes some sense, but it seems too conservative and passive in today's environments of open and rapid information exchanges. Our analysis suggests that an enhanced awareness of the country's national security environment and threats helps boost public support for higher defense budget.

3-2. The "perceivable" military force improvement increases public support for defense budget

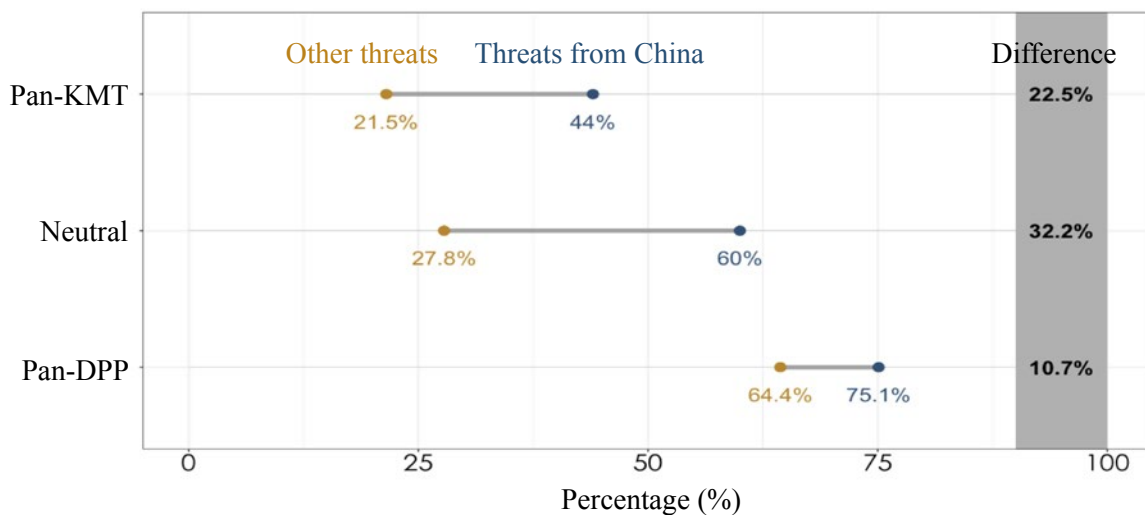
In terms of the "perceived strength of Taiwan's armed forces," this survey measured by asking the respondents, "do you think the overall strength of the armed force has become stronger than ever?" Figure 4 groups the respondents by political preferences and examines the effect of "perceived military strength" on their attitudes toward defense budget support. Similarly, we found that the "perceivable" military improvement boosts defense budget support. 44% of the pan-KMT respondents who considered Taiwan's military power had improved

supported an increase in defense budget (blue dots). In comparison, those who disagreed (yellow dots) had a 22.5% lower percentage of support for a higher defense budget. Similarly, the effect of “perceived military strength” is most obvious among those who claimed themselves neutral. 60% of the neutrals who believe the Taiwanese military has become stronger support an increase in the defense budget, while only 27.8% of

the neutrals who believe the military has not become stronger support an increase. In other words, the proper presentation of the military capability will help win public support for higher defense budget; that means the Taiwanese military should consider demonstrating its capability to the citizens through regular combat training and exercise since they are crucial to winning future budget.

Figure 4: Influence of the Taiwanese military capability on defense budget support from respondents with different political identifications

Percentage of respondents who chose to support an increased defense budget:



Note: the figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Source: Compiled by the author from the INSDR’s “Taiwan National Defense and Security Public Opinion Survey,” the fourth of the Year 2022.



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