

# **Taiwan's Evolving Defense Strategy: The Shift to Asymmetric Warfare since the 2011 Defense White Paper**

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## **Abstract**

Taiwan's defense strategies are critically important in the contemporary world because their failure has the potential to shift the balance of power and bring devastating consequences to the region. Their defense is also dependent on the United States, which has assisted Taiwan for more than several decades. With the unstable security environment in the region, it becomes crucial to thoroughly research the defense mechanisms Taiwan has in place in order to deter China effectively.

This research hypothesizes that the strategic shift toward asymmetric warfare capabilities was a rational adaptation urged by a convergence of internal factors and external threats. The paper dives deep into internal and external reasons behind this non-traditional shift, marked by the adoption of the 2011 Defense White Paper.

Internal struggles examined include economic decline, insufficient resources, lack of military-aged citizens, declining birth rates, and a low defense budget. The research thoroughly debates China's actions, demonstrating the increased number of activities in the Taiwan Strait by providing examples of Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) incursions, military exercises, and cyberattacks. External pressure also stems from a

decline in United States guarantees with a continuous strategic ambiguity approach, which has proven to be ineffective in deterring China's development. The United States advocated for the self-reliance of Taiwan and pushed for it by maintaining strategic ambiguity. The paper also thoroughly examines the implementation of the new strategy, specifically analyzing the creation of the Overall Defense Concept (ODC) and the development of key asymmetric assets like the Hsiung Feng III missile and the Indigenous Defense Submarine (IDS) Program. Furthermore, the paper also pinpoints the challenges and limits of the strategy, addresses specific vulnerabilities (such as gaps in cyber defenses) and highlighting the necessity of leveraging external support to achieve the self-reliance.

Ultimately, by examining these internal and external pressures, the research aims to explain the reasons behind the adoption of asymmetric warfare. The development of asymmetric assets compels Beijing to respond with unprecedented intensity. The research findings can be used as an analytical tool for policymakers, scholars, and readers to navigate the complex relationships in the Asia-Pacific region.

*Keywords: Asymmetric Warfare, Taiwan Defense, Strategic Ambiguity, Overall Defense Concept (ODC), People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan Strait, self-reliance.*

# 台灣不斷演變的國防戰略： 自 2011 年國防白皮書發布以來 朝向不對稱戰爭的轉變

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## 摘 要

在當今世界，台灣的防衛戰略至關重要，因為其失敗可能改變權力平衡，並給該地區帶來毀滅性後果。台灣的防禦也依賴美國，美國已援助台灣數十年。鑑於該地區安全環境的不穩定，深入研究台灣現有的防禦機制，以有效遏制中國，顯得尤為重要。

本研究假設，向不對稱作戰能力的戰略轉變是內部因素和外部威脅共同作用下的一種理性妥協。本文深入探討這項非傳統轉變背後的內、外部原因，其標誌是 2011 年《國防白皮書》的發布。

內部挑戰包括經濟衰退、資源匱乏、適齡兵役人口不足、出生率下降、國防預算不足。該研究深入探討了中國的行動，透過防空識別區入侵、軍事演習和網路攻擊等實例，展現了其在台灣海峽日益頻繁的活動。外部壓力也源自於美國持續的戰略模糊政策，以及對台灣的保障力度下降，而這種政策已被證明無法有效遏止中國的發展。美國主張台灣自力更生，並透過維持戰略模糊政策來推動這一目標的實現。本文並深入分析新戰略的實施，重點關注「全面防禦概念」(ODC)的構建以及雄風三型飛彈和自主防禦潛艇(IDS)計劃等關鍵非對稱武器的研發。此外本文還指出該策略的挑戰和侷限性，探討具體的脆弱性(例如網路防禦方面的漏洞)，並強調利用外部支援實現自力更生的必要性。

最後，透過分析這些內外壓力，本研究旨在解釋非對稱戰爭興起的原因。不對稱資產的發展迫使北京以前所未有的力道回應。研究成果可作為政策制定者、學者和讀者理解亞太地區複雜關係的分析工具。

關鍵詞：不對稱戰爭、台灣國防、戰略模糊性、整體防禦概念（ODC）、中華人民共和國（PRC）、台灣海峽、自力更生。

## I. Introduction

Ever since the China-Taiwan conflict began in 1949, managing the security environment in the Asia-Pacific region has become a challenge. Currently, the major source of tension is Taiwan's aspirations for sovereignty. Their objective is met with political, economic and military obstacles from the People's Republic of China (PRC), which will be thoroughly discussed in the second chapter. Since only a few states recognize Taiwan, they wish to expand the established claim by shifting existing flawed policies and setting objectives that will eventually result in international recognition. One of the most notable milestones for Taiwan is the adoption of the 2011 Defense White Paper, which marked progress in defensive strategy and introduced the new era of asymmetric warfare capabilities.

Over time, Taiwan's perception of the Chinese threat has evolved. The process is accentuated by numerous events such as China's incursions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zones, swift Chinese responses to visits by U.S. officials to Taiwan, economic manipulations, coercive signals and China's Anti-Secession Law (2005). The latter has become a red light for Taiwan's path to independence as it authorizes the use of force if Taiwan formally declares itself as an independent country. Faced with ongoing pressures, the decision to adopt asymmetric warfare did not happen in one day. It was a lengthy process filled with costly decisions and deliberate actions. Both internal and external factors played a crucial role in the decision-making process. The shift to asymmetric warfare is a recalibration of its defense priorities and an acceptance that matching China's capabilities is neither necessary nor achievable. This choice was symbolic and displayed an alteration from the traditional to the contemporary strategic era. Amid the transformation, navigating the political environment in the Asia-Pacific has become extremely difficult. Taiwan has shown the will to engage proactively and take the necessary steps to strengthen its international standing, setting the stage for strategic decisions.

The 2011 White Paper was adopted to manage the external and internal hurdles. Declining birth rates, shrinking defense budgets, economic reliance

on China and its incursions accompanied by warning messages, and the ambiguous nature of U.S. support all became a tipping point, prompting Taiwan to make non-traditional decisions and prioritize self-reliance. On the other hand, President Ma Ying-jeou's administration (2008-2016) pursued closer economic ties with China in hopes of de-escalating the situation in the Taiwan Strait; however, Beijing's main objective, the unification, remains unchanged. Despite them being on stable ground at that time, China still used cyberattacks, diplomatic pressure, and military exercises to demonstrate its unmoved position. Asymmetric warfare was a calculated choice and could shift the scale in Taiwan's favor. Because of limited resources, they cannot make significant developments in this area without the backing of dominant friendly nations.

To add to this, the partnership with the United States has significantly affected Taiwan's domestic and foreign policies. Despite their historical partnership in the Taiwan Strait Crisis, uncertainty surrounds the U.S. commitments. It is worth noting that presidential changes and thus shifting foreign policies have affected Washington's stance and perception of Taiwan. For instance, Barack Obama's presidency marked the time for cautious engagement. They avoided openly supporting Taiwan because maintaining a solid relationship with the more powerful and more developed China was their top priority. China, after all, posed the greater threat, and the administration had no interest in stirring up trouble or inviting retaliation. At the same time, they kept their relationship steady with Taiwan. During the Trump administration (first term), it was evident that Taiwan was seen as a deterrent to China's rise. More than \$18 billion in arms sales were approved, underscoring the importance of deterring China's hegemony. Notably, Trump's first term is noteworthy exactly for this reason; it was one of the most active periods during US-Taiwan relations. As for President Joe Biden, he also mentioned that support would be provided in case of an attack from China. The assistance in arms was substantial during his presidency as well.

Additionally, it is crucial to mention Trump's second term, which is more cautious and leans towards strategic ambiguity. They encouraged Taiwan to increase defense spending, which sparked dissatisfaction. Trump is

critical of Taiwan's defense spending. Defense accounts for 3% of its gross domestic product (GDP). Trump mentioned that the number should be at least 10 percent. Elbridge Colby, now Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, stated his support to President Trump's perception and believes Taiwan should focus more on defense.<sup>1</sup>

As Beijing continued developing A2/AD (Anti-Access, Area-Denial) capabilities and with the U.S. offering no clear assurances regarding its support for Taiwan in the event of an attack (Donald Trump made no direct commitments on this matter), self-reliance through an asymmetric warfare strategy became the only viable path to survival. This was a deliberate, calculated decision - the culmination of more than a decade of events surrounding the island.

Given the developments discussed above, it is worth examining why Taiwan adopted a different strategy, leading to the part of the study around which the paper is constructed. The most important question this research thoroughly answers is: Why did Taiwan opt for an asymmetric warfare strategy with the 2011 Defense White Paper? The question is multifaceted and allows for a broader understanding of the topic by providing information about Taiwan's strategic evolution. It is imperative to discuss every angle to reach objective conclusions. For this reason, the paper will address internal and external reasons behind this non-traditional shift.

Current events in the Taiwan Strait signal the escalation in conflict. The asymmetric warfare strategy has the potential to become a decisive factor for regional stability. Such a seemingly small decision, the deviation from regular policies, can have a tremendous impact, which is why it is beneficial to discuss this topic thoroughly. This paper aims to offer a wide-ranging view of the possibility of overcoming pressure and choosing the most valuable choice. The research findings can be used as an analytical tool for policymakers, scholars and readers to navigate the complex relationships in the Asia-Pacific

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<sup>1</sup> T. J. Shattuck, "The Return to Strategic Ambiguity: Assessing Trump's Taiwan Stance," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/05/the-return-to-strategic-ambiguity-assessing-trumps-taiwan-stance/>.

region.

## **II. The Evolution of Taiwan's Defense Strategy**

### **A. Taiwan's Internal Hurdles before 2011**

Taiwan's defense strategy evolution is multifaceted and consists of various broad perspectives. Historically, Taiwan has mostly been in a defensive mode. It has limited resources and cannot be considered an aggressor, as it cannot afford such an audacious attitude with the regional hegemon nearby. The island has always been focused on countering a possible invasion by China. They relied on tanks, fighter jets, naval ships and other traditional military hardware to have a sense of security. However, considering the restricted resources, it became impossible to maintain this model. With China's developments, it also became unmanageable to follow their progress and acquiring new and strategic defense mechanisms turned out to be the solution.

Demographic changes became one of the pressing issues for Taiwan. With the ageing population and one of the lowest birth rates, the concerns are alarming. Low birth rate is directly connected to the decline in military-aged citizens. When there is a shortage of manpower in the army, the internal situation is in decline and the actor is left vulnerable. After the move towards All-Volunteer Force (AVF), the volunteers are not inspired to serve due to the poor working conditions and low wages. The populace did not have faith in the military's ability to defend Taiwan. They were not keen on supporting another defense strategy because the previous ones effectively malfunctioned. The scandals about corruption in the military contributed to the lack of faith. The population saw the military service as an obligation, not a duty. This part became clear for the decision-makers and instead of attempting to match China's military might, they decided to establish a defensive stance. AVF remains one of the core initiatives aimed at modernization. With the correct path, it has the ability to become successful and influential in asymmetric defense.

It is notable here that Taiwan's internal problems are not limited to AVF,

low birth rate and insufficiency of middle-aged manpower. Dependence on the United States created certain challenges as well. The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) (1979) assures the superpower's assistance in case of an attack from the PRC. Under George W. Bush's presidency, the assistance was delayed and even frozen because the administration had concerns about cross-strait relations and their stability. Overdependence always comes at a cost. Such actions by the US led to uncertainty and Taipei started to doubt its commitment to a strategic partnership. Programs, such as IDF (Indigenous Defense Fighter), were costly and relied on external support, mainly from the United States. IDF aimed to develop a domestically produced multirole combat aircraft. It was alarming to see that such development was impossible without external help. The lack of resources is yet another reason why Taiwan decided to become more self-reliant and not to put "all eggs in one basket".

Another crucial program was Sky Bow (Tien Kung) Surface-to-Air Missile System. The Tien-Kung is an advanced, sophisticated, mobile, air defense system (For detailed information visit the link mentioned below).<sup>2</sup> It is a conventional asset and can have certain advantages, though its use will be limited against a more developed tools of PLA. Considering limited resources and capabilities, Taiwan needed US radar technology (phased array radar systems) to succeed in this program. As the U.S. is Taiwan's unofficial ally, its assistance is appreciated across all key areas of Taiwan's defense and development efforts. Significant financial aid from the superpower resulted in numerous successful technology developments.

To sum up, Taiwan's dependence on the US exposes vulnerabilities such as low defense spending and ineffective tactics, limited domestic resources and lack of strategic autonomy. All three combined create the need for Taiwan to urgently address these issues and eradicate any vulnerabilities that may be used as leverage. Furthermore, tackling demographic, financial and strategic matters will be beneficial for the stronger strategic defense Taiwan requires.

Another important aspect that directly eliminates the possibility of

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<sup>2</sup> Army Technology, "Tien-Kung III (Sky Bow III) Surface-to-Air Missile System," March 23, 2016, <https://www.army-technology.com/projects/tien-kung-iii-sky-bow-iii-surface-to-air-missile-system/>.

strong development is the overdependence on China's trade relations. This seems like an external factor; however, the impact PRC has on Taiwan's internal politics is immense. China is Taiwan's largest trading partner. This allows the use of dependence as leverage and the possibility of manipulating Taiwan's behavior on the international and regional scale. The New Southbound Policy (NSP) focused on reducing dependence and decentralizing resources. Taiwan decided to avoid having "all eggs in one basket". The policy achieved success after its adoption in 2016. With the data about exports to US reaching \$111.4 billion, the numbers with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) also increased 15.1 percent. Both numbers indicated a new peak.<sup>3</sup> The increased numbers point to the reduction in exports to China. The exports to China and Hong Kong dropped significantly to 31.7 percent, which marked the lowest number in 23 years.<sup>4</sup> The NSP achieved success in 7 short years; more success of this policy is still to be expected. Despite the decreased numbers resulting from the NSP, the dependence is high but possible to reduce. Furthermore, insufficient funds and a declining economy became a pressing issue because a strong economy is crucial for developing a solid military and defense. Not including it, the actor is perceived as vulnerable and subject to manipulation, scrutiny and pressure. One of the most important driving forces for young men in the military is the money they can earn to provide for their families. Since Taiwan's economy wasn't strong and durable, people had their concerns about the possibilities the military service could have for their family's well-being.

In conclusion, declining birth rates, decreased military-age manpower, overdependence on the United States' assistance, economic overdependence on China, insufficient funds to support key aspects of defense, and lack of trust in the population were the main internal issues that led to the adoption of an asymmetric warfare strategy. Evidently, with the external factors that will be discussed in the upcoming chapters, the internal situation also played

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<sup>3</sup> "Taiwan Reports 2nd Highest Foreign Trade in 2024," *Taiwan Today*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.taiwantoday.tw/Economics/Top-News/266277/Taiwan-reports-2nd-highest-foreign-trade-in-2024>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

a crucial role in the development process.

## **B. Understanding the 2011 Defense White Paper with the Focus on Asymmetric Warfare**

In 1997, the U.S. Department of Defense's Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) marked a significant acknowledgement of an asymmetric warfare as a tactic against powerful nations. The word "asymmetry" made its debut in this official document. The paper mentioned the opponents of U.S. started using asymmetric methods because the superpower has advanced conventional weapons that will render any of its competition ineffective.<sup>5</sup> The year 2011 marked an important date for Taiwan as it was the first time the administration used the term asymmetric warfare and officially embraced the concept that had been circulating since 1997. The decision was made about the vitality of altering the path they followed since 1949. Released in July 2011, Taiwan's National Defense Report (the equivalent of its White Paper) marked an unprecedented event in both tone and content. The report is extensive and includes key aspects of Taiwan's concerns and approaches regarding China, the U.S. and other pressing issues. The security environment is thoroughly discussed. Since one of China's most important policies is its A2/AD concept. The paper regarding these reads:

*'In view of the U.S. Army's active joint air and sea operation exercises recently, and its adjustment of force deployment in the Asia-Pacific, moving its forces forward for capability preservation, the PLA has thus been actively developing "anti-access/area-denial" capabilities in recent years to enhance the effectiveness of its intimidation strategy. As of 2010 the PLA Air Force and Navy possess joint fire support strike capabilities to penetrate the first island chain, forcing the U.S. and other states in the region to face the fact of the PRC's military expansion. Furthermore, although the quantity of new*

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Secretary of Defense, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 1997), pp. 1-69, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR1997.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-110930-527>.

*equipment outfitted by the PLA in 2010 was relatively less than past years, it is the likely result of immense defense funding invested in the development and production of long-range delivery equipment for its armed forces and second artillery. In the future, as this equipment is developed and outfitted, it will help the PLA accumulate area-denial capabilities.”*<sup>6</sup>

In this part, Taiwan emphasized the real possibility of the concept's success, which will have serious consequences for the region. The shift in U.S. strategy in the Asia-Pacific is notable because its primary countermeasure is an area-denial approach, which will prevent it from assisting Taiwan in combat. The power competition between two superpowers is also mentioned in the white paper. The extensivity of the information provided signals the grasp Taiwan has of the ongoing events. The previous behavioral patterns by China and the US are also considered to form a strong, example-based hypothesis.

Another notable part accentuated in the report is the defense strategy: Taiwan is not focused on aggression or adopting an offensive posture; rather, it focuses on defense and prosperity through peace. Their objective is to prevent war, withstand attacks and launch effective countermeasures in case deterrence fails. This is a defensive realism orientation because realists also see the conflict as a last resort if the survival of an actor is threatened. The defense white paper is focused on strengthening joint operations, enhancing force mobility, and building a layered defense system; all of them united are designed to make Taiwan stronger to withstand an attack. The objective is to survive against China and the defensive strategy strengthens idea about Taiwan wanting peace and prosperity. It is repeatedly mentioned in the report that peace in the Taiwan Strait is crucial and Taipei will ensure that this hope will be strengthened by appropriate events and relevant actions. Their aim is to build defense force with wide-ranging capabilities, to provide defense to the nation and safeguard it.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> National Defense Report Editing Committee, Ministry of National Defense, *2011 ROC National Defense Report*, 1st ed. (Taipei: Ministry of National Defense, 2011), pp. 72-73.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

Moving on to the most crucial shift demonstrated by the Defense White Paper - the Asymmetric Warfare strategy. According to the US Department of Defense, the definition of asymmetric warfare is explained in the following way: “A weaker or technologically backward opponent uses unexpected means or innovative ways to launch attacks on the weak points of stronger enemies while avoiding the sharp front of the stronger enemy.” To demonstrate how unparalleled their capabilities are, Figure 3-1 below shows the comparison of PRC and ROC military strengths. This is yet another reason why the asymmetric strategy became the most effective and advantageous option for Taiwan. Given the disparity in numbers, adopting a more clever and sustainable strategy becomes a logical long-term strategy.

	ROC Armed Forces	Category	People's Liberation Army
Total Force	Over 270,000		Over 2,300,000
Ground Forces	180,000 (including central, joint logistics, military police and reserve forces)	Force	1,284,000
	Tanks and armored vehicles: Over 1,200 Helicopters: Over 200 Heavy artillery: Over 1,000	Combat Equipment	Tanks and armored vehicles: Over 7,000 Helicopters: Over 400 Heavy artillery: Over 8,000
Navy	39,000	Force	264,000
	Over 180	Battleships	Over 930
	Large battleships: Over 30 Amphibious ships: Over 10 Submarines: 4	Principal Combatants	Large battleships: Over 70 Amphibious ships: Over 40 Submarines: Over 60
	Over 10,000	Marines	Over 8,000
Air Forces	37,000	Force	394,000
	Over 480	Fighters	Over 3,400 (including navy aviation)
	Bombers: 0 Fighters: Over 380 (F-16, M-2000, IDF and F-5E)	Principal Combatants	Bombers: Over 300 Fighters: Over 1,880 (J-7, J-8, J-10, Su-27, Su-30)
	Attack aircrafts: 0 UAV: 0		Attack aircrafts: Over 300 UAV: Over 280
	Air defense missile systems: about 30		Air defense missile systems: about 1,000
Second Artillery	N/A	Force	148,000
	N/A	Strategic Missiles	Over 180
	N/A	Tactical Missiles	Over 1,400 (including cruise missiles)
	N/A	Nuclear Warheads	450-500

Figure 3-1

Source: ROC, *National Defense Report 2011*, p. 82, <https://www.ustaiwandefense.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Taiwan-National-Defense-Report-2011.pdf>.

The war prevention objective is crucial because Taiwan can't withstand full scale military attack from China on its own. The Figure 3-1 is a clear demonstration of the power imbalance. The report mentions that Taiwan's military advantages provided by an opportune time, space and force will be employed to destroy enemy forces.<sup>8</sup> With this, they aim to show that their strengths will be used accordingly and will give them a decisive advantage. ROC will be ready for war; however, they will try to prevent it altogether at first, because the losses outweigh the gains in their case. They will continue to boost defensive countermeasures. Furthermore, they are open to communication with the PRC and remove obstacles that undermine their successful relationship.

In addition to All-Voluntary Force, their goal is to have firmer defense mechanisms. The focus on development is apparent. By making changes to equipment, personnel management, certain laws, structure, the military has a goal to enhance the quality of its personnel and the rules of engagement, allowing them to form more capable armed forces able to withstand significant strikes.<sup>9</sup> They will also develop better technology to issue warnings in case of any disturbance. This allows them to be more prepared and minimizes the risk of a surprise attack.

One of the most important parts in international relations nowadays is a collective alliance around pressing issues. Taiwan's decision to bolster its participation in the battle for regional stability is a prominent step forward. They are the first to bear the fruit of an attack if the stability is breached. Therefore, it is in their interests to protect and safeguard the stability of the Asia-Pacific region.

In conclusion, the 2011 Defense White Paper, also known as the National Defense Report, marked a historical shift for Taiwan. By acknowledging its lack of resources, China's growing development of A2/AD and frequent military exercises, dependency on the United States and shifting power

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<sup>8</sup> National Defense Report Editing Committee, Ministry of National Defense, *2011 ROC National Defense Report*, 1st ed. (Taipei: Ministry of National Defense, 2011), p. 102.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

dynamics in the region prompted Taiwan to adopt a more self-reliant strategy focused on developing asymmetric warfare capabilities to counter China effectively. All of these factors collectively contributed to the shift. Take two out of the equation, and we might have ended up with a completely different scenario. Furthermore, if the aforementioned objectives such as war prevention, boosting regional stability, conflict avoidance and defensive measures signal to defensive realism. With this shift, Taiwan understands its capabilities and is focused on using its advantages, but also thinking of survival. Even though the shift to Asymmetric Warfare is not specifically mentioned in the paper, their objectives signal this important alteration in strategy. The main objective is to avoid war altogether; however, Taiwan also understands China's desire for unification is strong and will not deter with time. Therefore, the forefront of their strategy is a stable environment in the region, while also focusing on developing asymmetric capabilities in the face of an inevitable Chinese threat.

### **III. China's Role in Shaping Taiwan's Asymmetric Warfare Strategy**

This chapter is focused on uncovering the importance of China's actions for Taiwan's strategic shift. PRC has strong objectives in the region, especially regarding unification and denying access to the United States. The consequences and effects of asymmetric warfare on China's policies will be discussed here, along with the actions that prompted the doctrinal shift. The objective is to demonstrate how successful the move has been so far, what areas were affected, and the countermeasures devised by the PRC. One of the hypotheses of this paper is to display, and strengthen with examples, that China played an important role in Taiwan's strategic shift by increasing defense spending and developing capabilities that directly undermined Taiwan's previous strategy.

Since the late 1990s, China's defense spending has considerably increased. Most experts believe the official national statistics are not entirely accurate and the numbers are far greater. The expansion rate was 16.2 percent

every year from 1999 to 2008.<sup>10</sup> For Taiwan, this is alarming because its much smaller budget makes it impossible to match China's ability to defend or project power. A substantial boost in defense allocation was announced in March 2011, bringing China's defense budget to 601 billion RMB (US\$ 91.5 billion).<sup>11</sup> It starts to become obvious that Beijing's path to hegemony is only filled with two obstacles - U.S. and Taiwan independence issue. China cleverly uses resources to develop and become a hegemon in the Asia-Pacific region. Since their main objective is to bring the island under the control of the People's Republic of China, countermeasures are essential for Taipei to prevent this. Furthermore, the military exercises and launches China conducts around Taiwan also alarm them and prioritize survival. US government reports provide new information regarding China's missile threat to Taiwan. While China's Short-Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs) has remained at constant number (1200) growing numbers of Chinese cruise missiles indicates that Taiwan could face a threat of approximately 2,000 Chinese missiles.<sup>12</sup> A key countermeasure was developing asymmetric warfare tools such as mobile radar and hardened infrastructure to combat such attacks. Certainly, this was not the first time China launched this tactic. Even back in 1996, before the presidential elections, the PRC launched missile tests because they did not desire voters to support the candidate. The PRC Premier Zhu Rongji's display of aggression on TV by waving his fists to deter the support to DPP candidate because consequences would be alarming, indicated yet another tactic besides use of force that China tries to employ in the fight against Taiwan.<sup>13</sup> This becomes a strong representation of how China wants Taiwan under its wing and united. They try to disturb any and every

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<sup>10</sup> "China Plans to Boost 2009 Military Spending by 14.9%," *The Chinese People's Liberation Army in 2025*, March 4, 2009, (Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College Press), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA621434.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Richard A. Bitzinger, "Modernizing China's Military, 1997–2012," *China Perspectives*, no. 2011/4 (2011).

<sup>12</sup> Richard D. Fisher Jr., "New Chinese Missile Threats to Taiwan," *Global Taiwan Institute*, July 26, 2017, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2017/07/new-chinese-missile-threats-to-taiwan/>.

<sup>13</sup> Chong-Pin Lin, "More Carrot than Stick: Beijing's Emerging Taiwan Policy," *China Security*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2008, p. 8, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/48318/Vol%204%20Issue%201.pdf>.

development in Taipei, using threatening messages, military means, diplomatic pressure, etc. Another crucial example is the implementation of spyware in Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense computers. An official of Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense stated that in 2006, Taiwan detected PLA attacks that resulted in two months of construction. It took 178 days to overcome this problem because notifying Microsoft and receiving the resolution took some time. For the duration of the time, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense was vulnerable against attacks.<sup>14</sup> The cyberattacks were frequent against Taiwan's political institutions and agencies which made them contemplate the security and devised measures to fight it.

In recent years, China's incursions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) and crossings of the median line have been more frequent than in the early 2000s. However, there are several notable instances. In 1999, PLA's fighter jets crossed Taiwan's median line of the waterway. The incursions continued until the re-election of President Tsai Ing-wen. The median is considered a buffer between PRC and ROC. China does not recognize it. It was defined again by Taiwan's Defense Ministry in 2019. This marked an important date because Taiwan has not defined its coordinates since 2004. In 2 years (2022-2024) PLAAF aircraft crossed the unofficial median line in the Taiwan Strait on an exceptionally high number of days (almost a year), indicating an escalation of military pressure.<sup>15</sup> On August 2, 2022, Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan. This became alarming for China because the visit marked the first time since 1997 that the US Speaker of the House visited Taiwan. China responded with one of the most frequent exercises around the island ever witnessed. They demonstrated their unwillingness to deepen US-Taiwan relations and that any further actions would not be tolerated. Figure 3-2 below shows the Taiwan Strait median line and Figure 3-3 shows how frequently it was crossed from 2019 to 2025. Showing this is crucial to understand the severity of the situation in the Taiwan Strait, to demonstrate the quickened unification processes initiated by China and the

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<sup>14</sup> Major General Huei-Jane Tschai, "Information Assurance Challenge and Readiness" (presentation, U.S.-Taiwan Defense Industry Conference, Annapolis, MD, September 11, 2007), p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> J. Wilkes, "What Median Line?" *Domino Theory*, August 13, 2024, <https://dominotheory.com/what-median-line/>.

high risks for the Asia-Pacific region.

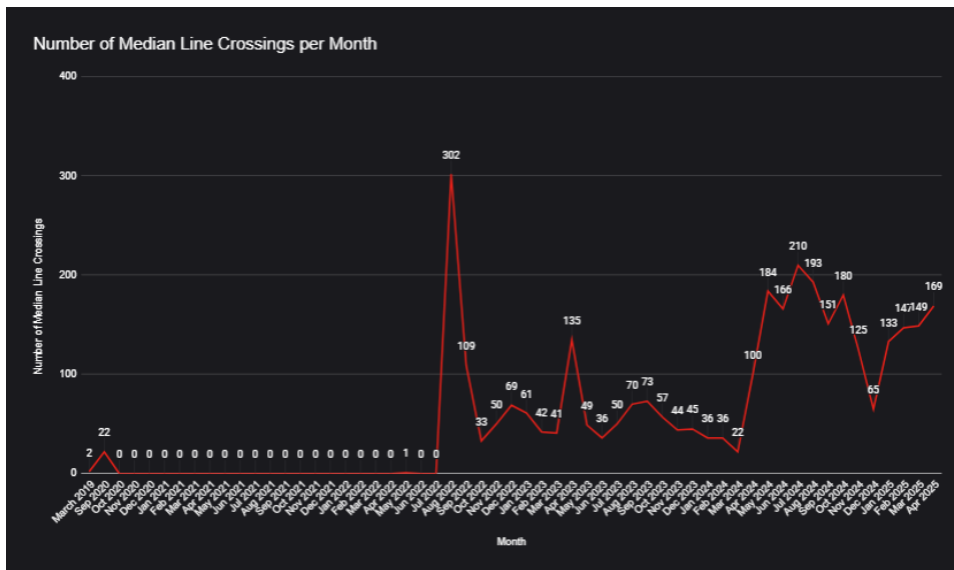


Figure 3-2

Source: “China and Taiwan ships stand off near sensitive buffer zone,” *Skynews*, April 9, 2023, <https://news.sky.com/story/china-and-taiwan-ships-stand-off-near-sensitive-buffer-zone-12853403>.



Figure 3-3

Source: PLATracker, “Median Line Crossings” category, <https://www.platracker.com/>.

Additionally, in 2004, China conducted record number of aerial drills. According to U.S. accounts, Beijing's military staged an unusually extensive and aggressive air drill. This involved dispatching over 30 aircraft sorties, organized into 10 distinct groups, to operate near the Taiwan Strait's median line. The sheer scale of this aerial display surpassed even the record set in 1998, causing extreme tension as Taiwanese authorities closely observed the unfolding situation.<sup>16</sup> China makes such moves to deter the US-Taiwan relationship and speed up the unification process. It is evident that China's relentless pursuit of unification becomes more prominent each year and its exercises as well as intrusions become more frequent. The regular incursions in ADIZ can be seen in a spreadsheet provided by PLATracker.<sup>17</sup> The document is informative and includes the time, dates, locations, aircraft types - all the needed data - about PLA's actions in the zone.

To understand the ongoing situation about this issue, let's observe the last reported activity in the ADIZ and median line performed by PLA. On May 31, 2025, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense reported "5 sorties of PLA aircraft, 7 PLAN ships, 1 official ship" around Taiwan. 4 out of 5 sorties crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait and entered Taiwan's northern and southwestern ADIZ.<sup>18</sup> Taiwan's response was employing CAP aircraft, Navy ships and coastal missile systems to observe their activity and act accordingly. Figure 3-4 below shows the activity of PLA's military assets in the Taiwan Strait on May 31 - June 1. There are various similar reports published by Taiwan's Ministry of Defense. This, once again, suggests the unstable situation in the Taiwan Strait and without an action plan, the international community might have another war on its hands.

The consequences of the PRC's numerous calculated actions, incursions,

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<sup>16</sup> Nancy Chao, "China Conducted Huge Drills in Strait," *Taipei Times*, October 22, 2004, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2004/10/22/2003207884>.

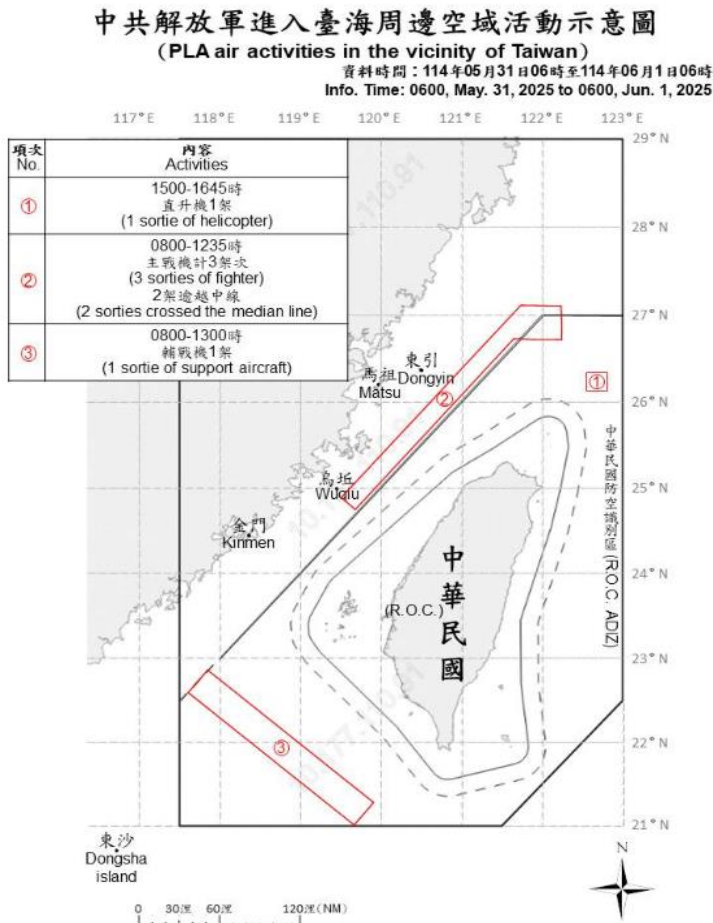
<sup>17</sup> This is the link for the spreadsheet mentioned above. <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qbfYF0VgDBJoFZN5elpZwNTiKZ4nvCUcs5a7oYwm52g/edit?gid=0#gid=0>.

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of National Defense, R.O.C. (Taiwan). (2025, June 1). 臺海周邊海、空域活動 [Military activities around the Taiwan Strait] [Image]. Ministry of National Defense. [https://www.mnd.gov.tw/Publish.aspx?u=NewUpload/202506/1140601\\_%e8%87%ba%e6%b5%b7%e5%91%a8%e9%82%8a%e6%b5%b7%e3%80%81%e7%a9%ba%e5%9f%9f%e6%b4%bb%e5%8b%95\\_050982.jpg&fid=52200](https://www.mnd.gov.tw/Publish.aspx?u=NewUpload/202506/1140601_%e8%87%ba%e6%b5%b7%e5%91%a8%e9%82%8a%e6%b5%b7%e3%80%81%e7%a9%ba%e5%9f%9f%e6%b4%bb%e5%8b%95_050982.jpg&fid=52200).

## Taiwan's Evolving Defense Strategy:

### The Shift to Asymmetric Warfare since the 2011 Defense White Paper

and pressures were Taiwan's adoption of asymmetric warfare and a move toward defensive realism, which enabled the development of military might and stronger security capabilities. Current actions have pushed Taiwan to expand its drone systems, implement stronger defense reforms outlined in the 2025 Quadrennial Defense Review, boost international cooperation, and develop its domestic defense industry, among other measures.



**Figure 3-4**

Source: Ministry of National Defense R.O.C. (Taiwan),  
<https://www.mnd.gov.tw/en/news/plaact/84474>.

### **A. Effects of Asymmetric Warfare on China's Policies**

Taiwan's defensive path paved the way for its adversary's new offensive course. PRC's diversified offensive course creates a dynamic best understood through the lens of the security dilemma. ROC states that they are focused on war prevention but at the same time continue developing mechanisms that will assist them in times of need in case of invasion. This is a normal behavior in today's political and security environment. Suppose the party is not involved in an arms race; they are in survival mode, which does not last long considering contemporary threats (not only military but also cyber and economic as well). Despite the accurate defensive stance and focusing on preventing a war that will have regional and international consequences, the countermeasures devised by China are also understandable. Their main objective since 1949 has been the unification and Taiwan's strategic development interferes with achieving this goal. China's Anti-Access/Area Denial strategy is bound to be the most effective tool in the invasion process. The idea behind the Anti-Access part is easy to understand. Its goal is to keep enemy forces from entering the region. In this case, China aims to make it difficult for the US to access the Taiwan Strait. The tools for the success of this include submarines, long-range missiles, air defense systems, etc. If Taiwan withstands the attacks and secures the island quickly, the U.S. might consider intervention. For successful anti-access, a swift victory is essential. If there is no swift victory, the chances of China's unsuccessful attempts to secure the territory and anti-access zones become higher; hence, the U.S. will ensure its adversary is finally defeated.

Area denial is focused on making it difficult for the enemy to operate in the region. Tools for this include cyberattacks, anti-ship and anti-aircraft systems, short and medium-range air defenses and others. Taiwan's asymmetric warfare is dangerous for A2/AD because it is meant to withstand the obstacles erected in that zone. It is worth mentioning that the shift in strategy had a counterproductive effect on China-Taiwan relations. PRC did not waste any time expanding its policies. For instance, there have been significant missile expansions to strengthen A2/AD capabilities. They include DF-21D, the DF-26 and the YJ-18. Beijing commands an arsenal of

conventionally-armed ballistic missiles, notably the highly precise DF-21 series. This includes the formidable DF-21D antiship ballistic missile (ASBM), colloquially known as the ‘carrier killer,’ specifically designed to target and neutralize large vessels, such as aircraft carriers, at sea. China grasps the necessity of advancing its capabilities because asymmetric warfare erodes its advantages and any weakness in the battle can be costly.

After Taiwan’s asymmetric warfare capability demonstration which included investing in IDF, UAV, ISR systems, introduction of ODC, shifting to AVF, US representative visit, developing naval capabilities, enhancing mobile coastal defense units, expanding missile systems, China responded with swifter measures such as military exercises around Taiwan’s ADIZ and median line, enhanced A2/AD capabilities, cyberattacks and disinformation operations, naval exercises, tests new technologies around the island. These actions were specifically designed to neutralize asymmetric threats. The main developments focus on the military, which must ensure that Taiwan’s asymmetric warfare capabilities do not gain the upper hand in a conflict or turn China’s own advantages against it. PRC’s actions directly signal the effectiveness of Taiwan’s strategy in persuading them to adopt its operational planning.

Paradoxically, asymmetric warfare, which was designed to foster a sense of security, further aggravated China and prompted the boost of the security dilemma in the region. States’ actions to boost their own security (Taiwan’s asymmetric warfare) are interpreted as threatening by others (China), leading to an increase in the latter’s military capabilities in response, which in turn makes the former insecure, prompting further development. This never-ending dance is a dangerous loop to find oneself in, especially given that the adversary is much more powerful with fully developed economic and military assets.

Additionally, China is not developing its capabilities to boost resources. They are doing so to counter Taiwan’s asymmetric warfare assets, their “porcupine quills” so to speak. Countermeasures such as advanced precision-strike assets, missiles such as DF-21D and YJ-18 are clear indicators that Taiwan’s asymmetric warfare tools influence Beijing’s strategic investments.

It forces the PLA to seek different tools that will prove to be effective against the island's quick asymmetric ones. Developing new properties and strategies takes resources, which PLA now has to spend to have swift victory as they so eagerly anticipate.

Another important factor in this equation is China's reputation and international image. Taiwan's strong resistance to military strikes can directly undermine China's legitimacy. Since asymmetric warfare is focused on making the invasion as costly as possible, in the event of a continued conflict, China has a disadvantage and will have casualties. One-child policy has created only sons in the military and since Chinese society is already sensitive to military losses, the policy creates more damage in this front. The social and political pressure will be immense in the case of a failure of a swift invasion. The ineffective strategy and loss of life because of it will result in public discontent. This will also affect China's public image, erode the trust in the regime's stability and expertise. An example of this is the Russian-Ukraine war. After Russia was unable to defeat Ukraine in several days, the international society started seriously doubting its capabilities. The expectation of rapid success was blocked by Ukraine's effective defensive tools, demonstrating how small adversary can counter advantageous technologies and reshape the perception of state's power.

Ultimately, asymmetric warfare leaves China with no choice but to abandon its broader objectives and focus on neutralizing Taiwan's warfare tools. Instead of addressing regional challenges, the PLA is focused on locating and engaging Taiwan's asymmetric assets using ISR, a process that is costly and time-consuming. Taiwan's policies clearly influence Beijing's behavior, as even a seemingly small diplomatic gesture, such as a U.S. official's visit to Taiwan, provoked numerous exercises around the Taiwan Strait. The development of asymmetric assets, whose main purpose is to render the opponent's powerful army ineffective, compels Beijing to respond with unprecedented intensity.

## **IV. The United States and its Role in Taiwan's Self Reliance**

### **A. United States' Evolving Strategic Approach and its Impact on Taiwan**

The United States made its presence known in the Asia-Pacific region in the 19th century. Over time, the influence has significantly grown and the countries have made deeper connections with the US. The assistance to Taiwan was critical because back in the 20th century, the island was more vulnerable. US involvement in the Asia-Pacific and its conflicts made it complicated for powers to dominate the region. After the Cold War, as the hegemon, they had the responsibility to address conflicts in various parts of the world and have effective strategies to ensure peaceful conflict resolution. Taiwan became crucial to the US in containing China and unofficially delaying unification.

With the establishment of US-Taiwan relations, strategic ambiguity was erected. The approach suggests acknowledging the 'One China' policy while also assisting Taiwan in its defense, sending substantial arms sales packages, and honoring the obligation under TRA. For many years, strategic ambiguity was perceived as an effective US strategy used in the region, allowing the navigation of complex political terrain with minimal confrontation. This strategic posture formed from the circumstances of its time.

In 1979, China did not possess the level of power it does today. Bearing in mind its economic, military and political developments, strategic ambiguity remained the predominant US strategy in the region for deterrence. Today, it is outdated and ineffective in deterring Chinese expansion. The goals of this approach are multifaceted. It prevents both sides from taking actions that could destabilize the region and end the peace. The indefinite responses from the US about their commitments to defend Taiwan give China doubts and without this certainty, they will not start an invasion. At the same time, strategic ambiguity deters Taiwan from becoming an internationally recognized independent state, as it could spark a conflict that the US has been tirelessly working to avoid. With this approach, US-China relations are also mitigated. They cooperate on global issues but avoid confrontations over

Taiwan. For the United States, the continuous pursuit of its objectives and interests in the region remains a critical component of its strategic posture. Despite continued arms sales to Taiwan, US administrations strongly encouraged Taipei to develop sturdy self-defense capabilities - a message suggesting that their assistance in case of a military conflict is not fully guaranteed. This approach shed light to the vulnerabilities within the broader US strategy.

While strategic ambiguity was initially effective, its limitations became apparent well before 2011. The events that ultimately prompted the release of the Defense White Paper highlighted that the United States' approach was no longer suitable and effective in the current environment. This logic becomes clearer when we consider that peace in the Taiwan Strait has always been a vague concept. The US objective of maintaining peace in the region is directly clashing with China's primary aspiration for decades - unification, which by nature is highly unlikely to be peaceful. PRC has not yet renounced the use of force, which is a clear indication that it remains as the last resort for achieving its decades-long goal. This unwillingness to abandon the use of force, combined with Taiwan's democratic autonomy, creates conditions that strategic ambiguity can no longer effectively address.

Because of the long history of the conflict, this topic has been debated many times. Many scholars have criticized strategic ambiguity and offered insightful ideas. With the immense assistance that the United States provided to Taiwan, the administrations also strongly emphasized the increase in self-defense. The full dependence on US support and commitment highlighted vulnerable aspects of Taiwan's defense. (Deng, 2018) in his work *US Taiwan Policy during the George W. Bush Administration (2001-2009)* observes that compared to previous presidents W. Bush supported Taiwan on a great scale. He also showed public support and sent arms sales package. The author states that US did not fundamentally change its course. Their main objective since 1950s has been deterring PRC aggression and avoiding ROC independence. The main goal is the stability of the region and US achieves it by managing the relationship between the two. (Deng, 2018)'s work is informative in proving that the pragmatic approach during the Bush administration was adjusted by the next administrations. He has a skeptical stance on US policy

toward Taiwan at that time. He is certain that the US did not long for Taiwan's independence because the change of status quo was not in their interests. Therefore, Taiwan was left as a bargaining chip. The strategic ambiguity has its limits, which were reached many years ago. If Taiwan is an instrument in the US-China conflict, this decreases reliance on external guarantees and strengthens the motivation for self-reliance.

On the other hand, (Grinter, 2010) has more optimistic stance on US policy. He deemed necessary for US to continue its policy aimed at maintaining peace in Taiwan Strait given the importance of US-China relations. However, "peace" is intrinsically an ambiguous term. Even back in 2010, Taiwan strait was not peaceful and the conflict remains unresolved today. The author makes a recommendation for the United States to continue highlighting the following: provocations toward China, such as declaration of independence, will not prompt US support.<sup>19</sup> The motivation is explicit, suggesting that the US is focused on maintaining strong US-China relations. Although, in today's security environment, attempting a two-faced approach is no longer feasible, as choices will inevitably have to be made. As the finish line approaches, the options too become increasingly limited. With the surge in China's military and economic capabilities, the United States cannot afford to delay the direct involvement in the region. To avert another Cold War, drastic measures may be necessary to ensure that China's influence will remain balanced rather than hegemonic.

Between 2009 and 2011, Barack Obama's administration took steps that continued his predecessor's policies. The "One China" policy has remained relevant. Strategic ambiguity was maintained and the president took cautious actions regarding the assistance to Taiwan. The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) was preserved and the US continued providing arms. Vice President Joseph Biden made similar points during a visit to Beijing in August 2011. He emphasized that US will not support Taiwan's independence and expressed

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<sup>19</sup> Lawrence E. Grinter, "Handling the Taiwan Issue: Bush Administration Policy toward Beijing and Taipei," *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 29, Issue 1, 2002, pp. 3-15, DOI: 10.1080/00927670209598873.

hope for the stable and fruitful cross-strait relations.<sup>20</sup> However, the Obama administration articulated concerns about China's political and economic leverage on Taiwan. They wished the cross-strait reconciliation to be achieved in a stable context and included \$6 billion arms package for Taiwan in February 2010 with \$5.85 billion deal in September 2011.<sup>21</sup> For a better demonstration of US assistance in this aspect, the Figure 3-5 below shows major US arms sales as notified to Congress from 2007 to 2011. While providing support, every president before 2011 emphasized Taiwan's self-reliance and strong defense capabilities. With Taiwan's limited resources, the US role is decisive in implementing the strategies and deterring China successfully.

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<sup>20</sup> David G. Brown, "Progress Slow as Taiwan Campaign Begins," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 13, Issue. 2, September, 2011, pp. 3-4

<sup>21</sup> Michael McCally, *Physicians for Social Responsibility: The Maryland Chapter*, Maryland Series in Contemporary Asian Studies, No. 4, 1995, p. 28, <https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1215&context=mscas>.

Date of notification	Major item or service as proposed (usually part of a program with related support)	Value of program (\$ million)
<b>2007</b>		
02/28	(218) AMRAAMs and (235) Maverick air-to-ground missiles for F-16 fighters	\$421
08/08	(60) AGM-84L Harpoon Block II anti-ship missiles	\$125
09/12	(144) SM-2 Block IIIA Standard air-defense missiles for Kidd-class destroyers	\$272
09/12	(12) P-3C maritime patrol/ASW aircraft	\$1,960
11/09	Patriot configuration 2 ground systems upgrade	\$939
<b>2008</b>		
10/3	(330) Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC)-3 missile defense missiles	\$3,100
10/3	(32) UGM-84L sub-launched Harpoon anti-ship missiles	\$200
10/3	spare parts for F-5E/F, C-130H, F-16A/B, IDF aircraft	\$334
10/3	(182) Javelin anti-armor missiles	\$47
10/3	upgrade of (4) E-2T aircraft (Hawkeye 2000 configuration)	\$250
10/3	(30) AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopters, (173) Stinger air-to-air missiles, (1,000) AGM-114L Longbow Hellfire missiles	\$2,532
<b>2010</b>		
01/29	(114) PAC-3 missile defense missiles	\$2,810
01/29	(60) UH-60M Black Hawk utility helicopters	\$3,100
01/29	(12) Harpoon Block II anti-ship telemetry (training) missiles	\$37
01/29	(60) MIDS (follow-on technical support for Po Sheng C4 systems)	\$340
01/29	(2) Osprey-class mine hunting ships (refurbished and upgraded)	\$105
<b>2011</b>		
09/21	Retrofit of 145 F-16A/B fighters, with 176 AESA radars, JDAMs, etc.	\$5,300
09/21	Continuation of training of F-16 pilots at Luke Air Force Base	\$500
09/21	Spare parts for F-16A/B, F-5E/F, C-130H, and IDF aircraft	\$52

Figure 3-5

Source: Shirley A. Kan, "Taiwan: Major U.S. Arms Sales Since 1990," Congressional Research Service, p. 62, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/weapons/RL30957.pdf>.

Despite significant financial assistance, the state of affairs in the Taiwan Strait remained the same. US commitments were limited to arms sales and their objective remained strategic ambiguity aimed at stabilizing peaceful relations in the region. The US had maintained a neutral position. While it could not strain relations with China, it also needed to support Taiwan to maintain a stable regional environment and manage its relationship with Beijing. Strategic ambiguity became the most useful tool for safeguarding US interests in the region. There is a discussion over the extent of its success.

Today, the circumstances are still very similar. During Donald Trump's first term, his decisions were often viewed as unconventional or unpredictable. The president emphasized: "I don't know why we have to be bound by a 'one China' policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade."<sup>22</sup> However, in 2017, the president agreed with XI Jinping to honor "'one China'" policy. He also approved arms sales to Taiwan at a higher level and capacity than during the Obama Administration. While his 'America First' approach is greatly aligned with the interests of American people, as the global superpower, the United States, carries broader responsibilities that require to address international conflicts.

As for the next president, even though Joe Biden made a historic speech assuring Taiwan of US defense in the event of a potential military conflict with China. The White House quickly withdrew the suggestion and affirmed publicly that the US's strategic ambiguity has not changed. This acutely highlights the delicacy of US-China relations. Both countries possess significant nuclear, economic and military capabilities as well as political standing, and a single miscalculation could trigger a conflict with catastrophic implications for the world. US policy-makers are well aware of these risks. At the same time, Washington has a reputation to consider, as being overtly conciliatory toward China could raise questions about its level of influence and capabilities.

Additionally, there is debate over the potential adoption of strategic clarity and its possible influence on Taiwan's defense posture. Under this approach, the US would explicitly define its stance regarding potential Chinese military actions. Experts argue that this would remove ambiguity about US commitments from the equation and reduce the likelihood of miscalculated steps by Beijing or Taipei. Critics warn that this approach could potentially escalate tensions and make Taiwan more reliant on the United States. It limits flexibility and could risk escalating tensions in the region. Overall, strategic clarity remains an uncertain option for the future. Its

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<sup>22</sup> The Associated Press, "A History of Trump's Statements on the 'One China' Policy," *AP News*, February 10, 2017, <https://apnews.com/general-news-c646266824ac47dea49bd9820985af81>.

benefits and risks are still contested.

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that while the United States remains a crucial security partner for Taiwan, its strategic ambiguity has shaped the conditions that persuaded Taipei's shift toward increased self-reliance. As China amplified its military capabilities and regional tensions persisted, the limits of ambiguity became evident, prompting Taiwan to reassess its defense position.

Additionally, successive U.S. administrations have maintained the careful balance while urging Taiwan to consider and develop a stronger self-reliant posture. The United States has been deterring Beijing, discouraging Taiwanese independence and with these calculated steps, preserving the regional stability. The ongoing debate over strategic ambiguity versus clarity highlights these tensions and the potential problems. Ultimately, this chapter explained that the United States advocated for the self-reliance of Taiwan and pushed for it by maintaining strategic ambiguity, publicly stating the limits to U.S. support and providing conditional arms sales, which then should have been interpreted as an independent defense capability.

## **V. The Asymmetric Warfare Strategy in Practice**

This chapter examines the tools developed through asymmetric warfare. The introduction of ODC marks an important step, which will be explored in more detail in the following chapter. Adopting this new strategy also presents challenges, as shifting from conventional tactics to a non-traditional approach requires significant resources, careful decision-making, and comes with inherent limitations. The chapter highlights how Taiwan has applied this strategy in practice, showing that despite internal resistance, notable progress has been achieved across several key areas.

### **A. Acquired Asymmetric Capabilities and Their Effectiveness**

Taiwan embarked on a pivotal journey after the adoption of the 2011 Defense White Paper. Their objective became acquiring asymmetric capabilities that would allow strong self-defense and deter its powerful adversary. This shift was imperative in ensuring that the island could

effectively withstand a potential attack from China. The aim was to take effective steps and implement clever strategic actions to deter their adversaries. This subsection outlines the capabilities Taiwan obtained and provides an assessment of its effectiveness.

Prior to 2011, Taiwan primarily focused on traditional defense systems, such as tanks, jets, and ships, which had demonstrated effectiveness in past conflicts. The Defense White Paper caused a remarkable shift in defense doctrine, because before this document, Taiwan did not recognize the necessity or importance of asymmetric warfare or its potential. Although Taiwan did not develop any asymmetric technology in 2011, the doctrinal shift was enough to push it into a new era of defense, which continues to this day.

For such traditionally minded people, adjusting to such a drastic transformation takes time. In 2013-2015 the resistance within military about new warfare tactics grew stronger. To address strategic needs, Taiwan has domestically developed Hsiung Feng III missile which is an advanced and most recent part of the Hsiung Feng missile series. It is Taiwan's first supersonic missile which signifies the giant leap in the technology development.<sup>23</sup> This system has already been in use before 2013; however, they introduced mobile land-based variants, which added to the level of effectiveness and survivability. Its effectiveness stems from its ability to remain unnoticed. They are much harder for the enemy to spot and remain a reliable threat in an attack. The ability to strike enemy vessels with high impact and swiftly makes this asset a vital part of Taiwan's military arsenal. In 2014, the Tuo Chiang Prototype was introduced, designed to evade radar detection and combat big ships using asymmetric warfare tactics. The best advantage is its small size, which makes effective against large ships.

Furthermore, Taiwan began developing drones, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) purposes. Without harming human pilots, they will be able to observe the

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<sup>23</sup> Missile Defense Project, "Hsiung Feng III," *Missile Threat, Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 13, 2017, last modified April 23, 2024, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/hsiung-feng-iii/>.

enemy forces and obtain information that will be beneficial for establishing and deploying asymmetric warfare tactics. The technological progress in 2013-2015 was evident; however, skepticism within the military played a big role in the success of these strategies. (See subsection 4.3. for detailed information about challenges.)

Taiwan's wish to develop its own submarine did not come to fruition because the necessary technologies and systems were readily obtainable. Taiwan acquired two Dutch Swordfish-class submarines in 1987; however, no significant development followed. Later on, assistance packages from US President George W. Bush included submarines and other kinds of arms. There is debate over whether submarines are considered the tools of asymmetric warfare; however, they are widely regarded as one of the most important asymmetric assets, mainly because of Taiwan's geographical location. Although the Indigenous Defense Submarine (IDS) Program was initiated before the mid-2010s, considerable progress was made under President Tsai Ing-wen, culminating in the launch of Taiwan's first indigenous submarine in 2023. (See Figure 3-6 below).



**Figure 3-6. IDS Haikun (SS-711)**

資料來源：〈國造潛艦原型艦「海鯤號」下水 預計明年底交艦〉，《公視新聞網》，2023年9月28日，<https://news.pts.org.tw/article/659284>。

All the mentioned strategic asymmetric assets demonstrate Taiwan's willingness and commitment to implement a new defense strategy successfully. The collective deployment of these assets substantially strengthens Taiwan's self-defense posture and enhances the effectiveness of deterrence against threats, ensuring a reliable defense structure.

## **B. The Overall Defense Concept (ODC)**

This part of the research examines not only what was acquired by Taiwan in the process of asymmetric warfare, but also its intended applications. It also specifies why asymmetric warfare was selected as the strategic approach. the chosen path. This part is vital because without it, the research would not illustrate how Taiwan plans to employ its capabilities.

From 2017 to 2018, one of the most pivotal concepts was introduced by Admiral Lee Hsi-ming. Overall Defense Concept (ODC) is a set of strategies based on asymmetric principles. The concept emphasizes the use of asymmetric capabilities in a defense strategy. It is a blueprint for a better understanding of their might and more effective tactics. The focus of the ODC is for Taiwan to be able to: “1) resist the existential threat, 2) effectively allocate limited defense resources, 3) build instant capabilities to address near-term crisis, and 4) maintain the ability to counter gray-zone coercion to maintain the public's morale”.<sup>24</sup> He also emphasizes on an interesting theory “winning the war” and highlights operational concepts against PLA.

*The ODC defines “winning the war” as “fail the enemy's mission to occupy Taiwan” instead of totally destroying enemy forces. Under this definition, the ODC specifically established some operational concepts based on the threat from the PLA and Taiwan's unique environment. First is to abandon the traditional war of attrition and adopt concepts of asymmetric warfare. Second, we need to adopt the concept of “denial” instead of “control.” Third, we need to focus on mission kills and attack the enemy's*

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<sup>24</sup> Hsi-min Lee, “Taiwan's Overall Defense Concept: A Conversation with Admiral Lee Hsi-min,” speech transcript, *Hoover Institution*, September 27, 2021, [https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/210927\\_adm\\_lee\\_hoover\\_remarks\\_draft4.pdf](https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/210927_adm_lee_hoover_remarks_draft4.pdf).

*center of gravity instead of focus on destroying their actual forces. Fourth, we need to shape the battlefield conditions to our advantage and engage the enemy when they are most vulnerable. Fifth, we need to utilize Taiwan's unique geographical environment and civilian resources. Sixth, we need to do our best to prevent the enemy from landing on our soil and establishing footholds. Seventh, the last line of defense is to conduct insurgency operations to make the enemy not able to effectively control our homeland.*<sup>25</sup>

These concepts form an objective that makes an invasion costly and unsustainable for Beijing. Admiral Lee left the office in 2019 and Taiwan abandoned his work. ODC was not part of the 2021 National Defense Report. They did not prioritize the small equipment over large conventional assets for several years, which made their decisions costly. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was a wake-up call for Taiwan. It was an indication that a small country with no substantial defense assets can withstand the attack of a larger foe not for a week but for years. In early 2023, the decision-makers started slowly shifting back toward asymmetric warfare and its core principles. Currently, ODC is not explicitly used; however, its main ideas are included in Taiwan's strategies. This adds depth to Taiwan's strategy commitments. The temporary abandonment of ODC highlights the complex nature of doctrinal changes and illustrates that such shifts are not always universally accepted or embraced.

The most frequently discussed and favored is the Porcupine Strategy, with Admiral Lee as the main supporter. It is a broader plan that was discussed in detail in ODC. In 2008, William Murray first articulated the "Porcupine Strategy" for Taiwan's defense. This suggests that Taiwan ought to focus on defensive capabilities that prevent invading forces from achieving swift success. In a striking metaphor, strategic thinkers encouraged Taiwan's defense leadership to adopt a 'porcupine' posture for their country's protection, likening it to the rodent's formidable ability to deter predators with its array of sharp spines. The goal of this strategy is to avoid conflict and use asymmetric warfare tactics if the first part is not successful. Ukraine is a notable example of the success of an asymmetric defense strategy. Taiwan is

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

trying to incorporate porcupine strategy concepts.

### **C. Challenges and Limitations**

This subsection critically evaluates the key challenges Taiwan faced in adopting asymmetric warfare. They include: the struggle to welcome change, various threat perceptions, declining birth rates, unfavorable perceptions of the military, AVF struggles, challenges in personnel training, a limited defense budget, and technological gaps.

The first challenge that Taiwan encountered was the inability to welcome the new strategic developments freely within the military. They are used to large vessels, which, under the new asymmetric strategy, will not be largely available. Therefore, a cultural shift was also necessary within the armed forces to help them acclimate to the new era. The idea of ODC is to deny a rival a successful invasion and pursuing this objective can be problematic for some within Taiwan's defense institution. There is a possibility that traditional people will follow old ways (e.g., defense against blockade) rather than new, more effective ones, despite the advantages over old strategies.

Another point is Taiwan's demographic crisis. Birth rates are declining, which affects defense systems. There is a shortage of recruits and the strict military situation is not well-received by many citizens. This is yet another reason why AVF did not work effectively. The uncertainty within the military creates a sense of chaos, making it difficult to recruit and attract people. Military personnel expenses are significant since the AVF was accomplished. This puts strain on an already thin defense budget and does not allow for more funding for personnel training alongside other important aspects of the military.

On the other hand, symmetric warfare uses fewer resources than Taiwan's traditional assets. However, it still requires great financial backing. In this regard, the US aid is particularly relevant. Taiwan's defense budget remains notably low compared to China's, presenting a clear strategic disadvantage. Many scholars mention the United States as the main force to assist Taiwan in adopting asymmetric capabilities at a much faster rate than it currently is. The gaps in cyber defenses need to be urgently addressed as they

represent vulnerabilities that could be exploited in an attack. Developing such effective technology is a challenge for Taiwan. Understanding these challenges provides an important context for examining the relevance of strategy and implementation.

One might ask: Why is it important to examine these issues? The answer is multifaceted. Firstly, it shows the efforts that were employed to develop a relevant strategy. A strong strategy, however, remains theoretical without practical application, rendering it ineffective. Challenges and limitations directly impact Taiwan's ability to successfully adopt and implement asymmetric warfare. Without considering these factors, one can't truly evaluate the strategy's effectiveness. Pinpointing vulnerabilities is crucial for successful application of a new policy; without awareness of its own weaknesses, Taiwan risks leaving openings that could be exploited by adversaries. Additionally, this analysis highlights areas where external assistance - potentially from the United States - may be necessary. Ultimately, the success of Taiwan's asymmetric warfare strategy depends on developing capabilities, understanding the limiting factors, addressing vulnerabilities and leveraging external support.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Current developments in the Taiwan Strait suggest the urgent need for a discussion about the importance of defense strategy. Security concerns skyrocketed with continuous military exercises, incursions in the ADIZ, median line crossings, and diplomatic pressures. This research demonstrated that Taiwan's turn towards asymmetric warfare with the adoption of the 2011 Defense White Paper was a rational, necessary and timely response to the pressures, threats and developments around the island.

Taiwan's shift was induced by an unfortunate internal environment, which included demographic issues, limited resources, economic decline, low defense budget, and lack of military-aged citizens. The decision was influenced by external factors as well, which played a considerable role in shaping Taiwan's foreign policies. The research outlines the role of China and the U.S. The superpower's strategic ambiguity has become insufficiently

effective in deterring China's growing capabilities and its accelerated unification process. China, with an increased defense budget, continuous military exercises, technological developments, incursions and crossings in ADIZ and median lines, alarmed Taiwan's defense institutions, which later on decided to finally make a non-traditional decision.

The importance of conversing about the reasons behind Taiwan's adoption of the Defense White Paper and therefore moving toward an asymmetric warfare strategy is immense due to several key reasons: 1. Continuous threat from China creates an unstable regional environment where nobody knows what could spark a military invasion. Understanding Taiwan's defense helps explain its goals and capabilities. 2. Emphasizing this topic gives the international community a chance to adopt better, more effective policies. 3. The doctrinal shift was a historical moment for Taiwan. With the developments in place, Taipei shows the world that it is capable of assimilating the challenges of the 21st century. 4. Most importantly, Taiwan's defense is not only its own. The stability of the region is dependent on it. This is a huge responsibility. Without external help, the end will not be favorable for anyone. 5. Providing US-China perspectives, their actions and responses, is beneficial for the research because it helps understand Taiwan's actions more clearly.

In conclusion, the value of this topic is multifaceted and especially prominent currently with China's sped-up unification process. The implications of the doctrinal shift are greater than was anticipated. It is focused on Taiwan's objectives and capabilities but also shows the importance of the island for the region. The stability of the Asia-Pacific is dependent on Taiwan's ability to defend itself against a powerful invasion. With the support of the United States, the asymmetric defense will be boosted and the process will be accelerated. However, without external assistance, the rate Taiwan is going, it is improbable that they will withstand even the first attack. The research provides examples that strengthen the hypothesis. The examples include: demographic and economic issues, low defense budget, lack of military-aged manpower, inability to quickly adapt to change and differences in threat perceptions.

Furthermore, while historically designed to maintain the balance, the United States' strategic ambiguity compelled Taiwan to asymmetric warfare. Taipei could not depend solely on Washington's commitments to maintain regional stability. Over time, it became insufficient to maintain China's growing military capabilities, economic enhancements and strong objectives. Beijing's incursions in the ADIZ, crossings of the unofficial median line, economic and diplomatic pressures, and threatening messages served as alarms, indicating the sped-up unification process, compelling Taiwan's defense institutions to abandon traditional strategies and make significant alterations.

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