

4. Conclusions

4.1 Summation

Taiwan faces many challenges in contending with the continually growing national strength of China. A strong military is a clear necessity to maintain deterrence across the Taiwan Strait. However, there is widespread consensus that the ROC military needs to continue with reforms that have been ongoing for the last decade, especially because Taiwan does not have the same financial resources as China, and therefore must be especially effective in using its limited resources. Reforms are needed to improve the “software” of national defense, to include increasing joint warfighting capability, developing a more sophisticated planning and assessment process, and integrating more sophisticated warfighting concepts. The ROC military has an imperative to interact with other militaries, especially with the armed forces of the U.S., its main security guarantor. The U.S. is often both a champion of, and model for, these reforms. Effective interaction self-evidently requires clear communication and a common conceptual framework among the professional officer corps, and this creates an obvious need for officers with cultural and linguistic fluency to facilitate that interaction.

Foreign education for officers is an effective way to address many of these deficiencies. Education is a transformative process, potentially creating officers with broadened minds, greater flexibility and the added intellectual sophistication to effect change. Overseas education, whether as a cadet, as a full-time student in a civilian institution, or in a PME program, gives officers the added benefits of inculcating linguistic and cultural fluency, and often increased understanding of U.S. military practices and concepts. The U.S. has long known this, because its program to educate foreign military officers is premised on the idea that these three areas—language, culture and the technical aspect of military education—are investments in better bilateral communications, increased rapport and common understanding, potential access to future leadership, and the transmission and normalization of U.S. values, specifically the role of a professional military in a democratic society. These same subjective ties the U.S. seeks to create conceivably work both ways, and are added benefits to Taiwan’s military, above-and-beyond the academic or military content.

To reform advocates, U.S.-based training should be seen as a potent means to enhance the effectiveness and dissemination of the other proposed reforms. Officers who are comfortable with a foreign language and foreign military concepts should be seen as assets and should be especially helpful with doctrine, training, analysis, modeling, planning, developing new forms of leadership for a changing Taiwanese society, and even conducting negotiations or relations with foreign militaries. These officers should be natural advocates of reform because of their exposure to new ideas, and the conceptual broadening that foreign experience brings. On one level, Taiwan has long recognized the advantages of learning from foreigners or in a foreign environment, and foreign-educated officers are often used informally as foreign-language experts. Also, in certain international contexts, foreign-educated officers can even be walking advertisements and ambassadors for Taiwan's democratization, an implicit contrast with the PRC that itself can form part of the ROC's national defense.

However, officers who have returned from overseas potentially face both cultural and institutional barriers. They cite obstacles such as rigid and conservative thinking; a closed military culture; peer and superior hostility; stiff competition for promotion opportunities; a lack of successful role models with similar experiences; anti-intellectualism; and an institutional focus on hardware and practical training rather than a more expansive and visionary commitment to the abstract ideals of education. Returnees may be somewhat skeptical about the actual institutional value placed on education. They contrast the transformative value of their experiences with the results-oriented and pragmatic policies governing education. They adopt holistic attitudes towards the opportunities, seeing them as investments which benefit both the officer and the nation as a whole, and believe that focusing on the comparative expense of overseas education is a "penny wise, pound foolish" attitude. They face a potential paradox in that although they are highly suited to champion improvements, they have very limited maneuver room, and may not last long enough in a military career to reach a level where they can have a widespread impact.

Legislative attention to this matter demonstrates that this problem, or even just the perception of this problem, is taken seriously at a level above the MND, and therefore bears watching. However, attitudes are not uniformly negative, as respondents believe it is only a matter of time before they reach the "critical mass" needed to make substantial improvements.

The proposed legislative remedy also suggests that defense expertise and sophistication is growing, insofar as the proposal to increase military education opportunities recognizes the importance of human capital, and not just military hardware, in national defense.

4.2 Limitations and Future Research

As noted above, this thesis approached the problem through interviews and perceptions. Future avenues of study could include more formal analysis within the military, to test rigorously the perceptions these officers have developed. Other researchers may also examine if there are organizational means to better quantify and manage the multifaceted benefits gained through foreign education, and whether current policy gives enough weight to secondary and tertiary effects, rather than on just the academic content. Considering the potentially career-long benefits and transportability of foreign language fluency compared to the transience of expertise in some disciplines, this may be of long term value to the organizations.

Comparisons with the experiences of officers in other nations may also be fruitful. Many of the same questions, such as how much the organization values education and how does foreign education enhance the value of an officer, certainly could be examined within the U.S. military context. Likewise, future research may compare the policies and institutional approaches to foreign education of other nations somewhat comparable in size or in some aspects of their national security to Taiwan, such as the Philippines, Israel, South Korea and Singapore. Finally, this thesis has examined mainly factors internal to the military, but the role of external factors must also be considered. The direction of military reform and development is set in part by the Taiwanese political process, which adds a certain degree of unpredictability to what some might hope would be a rational and deliberate process.