

Taiwan needs smart military think tank

Written by Taiwan News Editorial
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Taiwan's first national defense think tank will begin preliminary operations with the today's official opening of a "National Defense Think Tank Preparatory Office" under the Ministry of National Defense's Integrated Assessment Office.

First proposed by former defense minister Lee Jye under the former Democratic Progressive Party administration, the new think tank will be tasked with the functions of actively cultivating national defense research and international interchange talent and enhancing Taiwan's national defense policy and strategic analysis capabilities.

If the Legislative Yuan approves a draft statute for the establishment of the National Defense Think Tank, the new agency will have a NT\$150 million budget, boast a staff of over 40 persons and will have departments for studies of the PRC's People's Liberation Army, international security affairs, national defense strategy and military interchange and a secretariat.

Deputy Defense Minister Yang Nien-tzu told reporters on Tuesday that the cross-strait military interchange was not a medium or long-term objective of the new think tank and also stressed that the new organization would not become a sinecure for retired military officers and that at least half of the research positions would be held by civilians.

In general, the MND's decision to set up the new think tank is a positive development as it shows that our national defense establishment appreciates the importance of strategic studies, especially in the face of the threat from the authoritarian People's Republic of China, which is rapidly expanding and upgrading its military prowess and steadfastly refuses to abandon the option of using military force to annex Taiwan.

Moreover, the MND's decision to establish this new think tank and integrate strategic analysis resources is a welcome sign that the Taiwan military is aware of the necessity to hedge our national risks at a time when President Ma Ying-jeou's Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) administration is promoting cross-strait "reconciliation" with the Chinese Communist Party regime and implementing a policy of "fire-extinguishing" diplomatic truce. However, it is important to note that the establishment of a think-tank for military studies should be strategically different from that of traditional research institutions and that its planning should carefully consider the following problems.

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First, due to Taiwan's lack of international recognition, any Taiwan military officer will find it difficult to interact directly with official counterparts in most other countries.

No straightjackets

Hence, the legislation of an official status for the new organization and its placement under the MND headquarters may obstruct its ability and reduce its flexibility to engage in international exchanges.

Second, it is unclear from the sparse MND statements made about the plan what role the new think tank will really play in the defense ministry's policy and strategy formation and its role in policy and decision making or its position with relation to the National Security Council chaired by President Ma.

It will also be important for the new think tank to find its own specific niche to differentiate itself from other policy think tanks in Taiwan and avoid duplication of effort.

Third, if the new think tank is part of the government bureaucracy instead of being an independent organization as Lee Jye conceived, it remains open to question how efficient its operations will be and how much autonomy its researchers will enjoy.

Moreover, the new think tank should not become simply another center for abstract theoretical research but should act as a real platform for the integration of military strategic and intelligence information and analysis devoted to understanding and finding solutions to real problems.

Finally and most importantly, it is vitally important that the researchers of the new think tank enjoy a high degree of freedom to manifest their imagination and energy and have free space for creative debates.

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Full guarantees of free speech and intellectual freedom are essential preconditions if the think tank is to fulfill its function of providing both quality and useful policy recommendations and cultivate new military research talent.

After all, if the basic assumptions of strategic options can not be debated or questioned, there will be little point to spending NT\$150 million of taxpayers money for the replication of official propaganda packaged as "strategic studies."

It is therefore essential that the operation of the new think tank be free from ideological straightjackets or partisan restraints since the only priority for military strategists should be how to win a military conflict if such a clash absolutely cannot be avoided.

Unfortunately, the Ma administration has already showed worrisome signs of narrow mindedness by refusing to engage in serious dialogue or debate with the opposition Democratic Progressive Party on foreign and mainland China policy. Extension of this practice into the new national defense think tank would be both regretful and self-defeating.

In the face of the PRC threat to Taiwan's democracy and independent existence, the formation of an independent think tank to research and debate strategy options is a welcome decision whose positive significance should not be compromised from the start by the imposition of predetermined ideological or partisan "answers."

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