

The US Defense Intelligence Agency last week released a report titled *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*. It contains warnings for US military planners and policymakers, and should serve as a wake-up call to Taiwanese unaware of, or reluctant to acknowledge, the threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party.

The essence of the report is that China has long been building a powerful, modern military and is now at the cutting edge of weapons development, in some cases even outpacing the US.

It raises two concerns that are pertinent to Taiwan's national security:

First, China has been modernizing its military not for a major global war, but in preparation for regional efforts, and potentially a local war. This would almost certainly, in the short term at least, involve the annexation of Taiwan.

Second, Chinese People's Liberation Army planners might now be confident enough to tell Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) that winning a local war is a viable proposition.

Taiwan has a real and imminent national security threat from a specific foreign adversary. If the US is aware of this, all Taiwanese should be, too.

The US has a legal commitment to protect Taiwan from Chinese invasion. However, whether, and to what extent, it will instruct its military to act on an invasion depends on the level of support from the American public. This might be difficult to garner if Taiwan is deemed to be unprepared to defend itself.

A military's strength depends not just on weaponry and technological sophistication, but also on the number and caliber of the people serving in it. Caliber is bolstered by experience, training, morale, shared objectives and a collective sense of threat awareness.

Greater threat awareness needed

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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In 2011, former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) made good on a campaign promise to end conscription and move toward an all-volunteer military. Two years later, the mandatory year-long training was reduced to four months, and President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) later oversaw the transition to an all-volunteer force.

However, the number of people enlisting in the military has failed to meet the required minimum.

Conscription is controversial and unpopular. That is understandable under normal circumstances, but Taiwan is not facing normal circumstances.

Mandatory service has real value in creating an effective reserve force. Its reduction to four months, a period far too short to give conscripts any meaningful training, was a mistake.

Soldiers complained about being given only rudimentary instructions and impractical training, and of being ordered to sweep floors, clean toilets or push papers. Instructors questioned the point of teaching temporary conscripts complicated procedures and the operation of advanced systems when they did not have enough time to learn anything of value.

How was this supposed to create a motivated, effective reserve force? It was a waste of time and money, and only served to exacerbate the sense of pointlessness in the endeavor when its purpose — protecting Taiwanese's freedoms and way of life — should have been explicit.

Recruiting sufficient soldiers for an all-volunteer force has many challenges, one of which is Taiwan's demographic time bomb and the shrinking pool of potential recruits. Given this, more women would need to be encouraged to join the military.

If this happens, the military must work toward achieving gender equality in terms of status, respect, promotion prospects, salary and task allocation, as well as having sufficient mechanisms in place to prevent incidents to which women might be vulnerable, such as sexual assault.

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The government needs to do more to impress upon Taiwanese the imminent danger posed by China, as well as the value of military training and serving in the armed forces to protect the nation.

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