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An Analysis of Public Trust in the Military in the Republic of China

Public trust in the military in Taiwan has varied greatly in recent history; the number of people who had quite a lot or a great deal of trust in the military fell from 69% in 2001, to 60% in 2006, to 44% in 2010, as measured by Asian Barometer. While a variety of factors, ranging from reputation to conscription, typically affect public views of the military, ultimately the main driver behind this trend in public trust in the military is the status of Cross-Strait relations, along with the foreign policy views advanced by the Taiwanese government.

One factor that typically impacts public opinion of the military is its reputation. More specifically, a military with a competent image will likely be viewed positively, while a military embroiled by scandals or incompetence will likely be viewed negatively. The Taiwanese military has certainly seen plenty of major scandals, from [the Lafayette frigate scandal in the early 90s](#) to [the death of Hung Chung-chiu in 2013](#). However, no notable scandals occurred in the 00s, so it is unlikely that a decline in reputation caused this recent fall in public trust of the military.

Public opinion of the military could also be connected to public opinion of government institutions, as a whole. In particular, people might view all government institutions, military and civilian, more positively, perhaps because of a growing economy. On the flipside, people might grow more cynical of all government institutions, perhaps because of a recession or a major natural disaster. So the fall in public trust of the military might be explained by a broader fall in public trust of all government institutions in Taiwan. Indeed, the number of people who had quite a lot or a great deal of trust in the national government fell from 46% in 2001, to 39% in 2006, to 33% in 2010. However, this decrease is still less than the decrease in public trust in the military. In fact, out of all the government institutions included in the survey, the military saw

the largest decline in public trust in absolute terms, and the second largest decline in percentage terms, from 2001 to 2010.¹ Therefore, while increasing cynicism regarding all government institutions might explain part of the fall in public trust of the military, it cannot explain all of it.

The amount of people involved in the military could also impact public views of the military. On the one hand, if more people are in the military, the public might view the military more favorably, since more people will have friends or family who have served in the military and will, thus, be more familiar with the military and its norms and culture. On the other hand, in countries with military conscription, people who are forced to join the military, thereby diverting their lives, might view the military more negatively. Taiwan had military conscription for most of its existence; however, over the past few decades, the Taiwanese government slowly [reduced the length of conscription](#), and [it ultimately ended conscription in 2018](#). This decline in conscription does align chronologically with the fall in public trust of the military from 2001 to 2010; however, it is more likely that causation goes the other direction, with falling trust in the military leading to political pressure for these conscription reforms. In fact, former President Ma, of the Kuomintang (KMT), campaigned in 2008, in part, on [downsizing the Taiwanese military](#).

Lastly, public opinion of the military could be affected by the external threat environment facing the country. For example, in a country that is under constant threat from a neighboring country, the public might view the military very favorably, perhaps as a sort of patriotic “rally behind the flag”-style response. On the flipside, in a country that is not under any immediate threat, the public might start to view the military more negatively, perhaps because they begin to think the military is a waste of government resources. Both sides of this pathway could be

¹ Courts saw the largest decline in public trust in percentage terms; 50% of people had quite a lot or a great deal of trust in the courts in 2001, while only 30% of people had quite a lot or a great deal of trust in the courts in 2010, for a decline of 20 percentage points or 40 percent.

compounded by the rhetoric and policy advanced by civilian leadership; a country under threat with a hawkish President will likely see even greater support for the military, while a country at peace with a dovish President will likely see even weaker support for the military. Indeed, this pathway is likely the main driver behind changes in public trust in the military in Taiwan. In the latter half of the 20th century, Cross-Strait relations warmed, ultimately resulting in the “One China” consensus in 1992. However, after former President Chen, of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), won the 2000 election, the Taiwanese government [began to back away from this consensus](#), leading to worse relations between China and Taiwan.² In particular, China engaged in [a military buildup](#), aimed at Taiwan, during this period. Then, in 2008, former President Ma won election, and resumed [seeking better relations with China](#). The worsening of Cross-Strait relations during former President Chen’s tenure, and the improving of Cross-Strait relations during former President Ma’s tenure, therefore likely best explains this trend in public trust in the military in Taiwan. As a side note, a similar trend can be seen in South Korea.³

A variety of factors, from reputation to conscription, typically affect public views of the military. In the case of Taiwan, however, it appears that the status of Cross-Strait relations, along with the rhetoric and policy advanced by the Taiwanese President, has been the main driver behind recent trends. This suggests that, given the recent reelection of President Tsai, of the DPP, coupled with the more hawkish views of Chinese President Xi, it is possible that public trust in the military in Taiwan could potentially increase to prior levels.

² The DPP supports greater Taiwanese sovereignty, while the KMT supports closer relations with China.

³ The number of people who had a quite a lot or a great deal of trust in the military in South Korea was 74% in 1996, 59% in 2003, and 54% in 2010. This matches closely with the adoption of the Sunshine Policy by the South Korean government, leading to lower tensions on the Korean peninsula, in the late 90s and early 00s. This was followed by North Korea obtaining nuclear weapons, in turn followed by the election of conservative governments in South Korea that rejected the Sunshine Policy, increasing tensions on the Korean peninsula in the late 00s.

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