

RESEARCH NOTE

Core Public Attitudes toward Defense and Security in Taiwan

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Taiwan Politics

The capacity for self-defense and the resolve to fight play crucial roles in Taiwan's national defense. A long-term observation of public opinion regarding national defense issues can help government grasp the pulse of public opinion and inform policy implementation, so that it coordinates more closely with public opinion. Using five surveys conducted between 2021 and 2023 by the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University and commissioned by the Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR), this paper investigates the trends in Taiwanese public attitude towards important defense and security issues. Results from longitudinal study reveal the following: first, more than half of the respondents were confident in Taiwan's military to defend the country, but that percentage decreased after the occurrence of major incidents; second, respondents' expectation of U.S. troop deployment if China were to invade hovered around fifty percent, and was contingent upon international events and visits by high-ranking foreign officials to Taiwan. While Taiwanese will to fight was affected by Chinese military drills and cognitive warfare by China, the level of resolve remained fairly consistent. This paper also unveils a complex interconnection influencing Taiwanese resolve for self-defense, whereby respondents' partisanship, perceptions of U.S. commitment to Taiwan, confidence in Taiwan's national military, and willingness to fight are intertwined. Future research can build upon these results to explore changes and continuity in Taiwanese views on defense and security.

Introduction

In 2023, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) published a report entitled "The First Battle of the Next War." Based on 24 simulations of war scenarios, the report predicted that a People's Liberation Army (PLA) invasion of Taiwan in 2026 would inflict heavy casualties on troops from the United States (U.S.), China, Japan, and Taiwan, but the U.S.-led forces would emerge victorious, while the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would suffer even heavier losses, to the point of challenging the CCP regime. Such a prediction was based on the assumption that Taiwan would resist and not capitulate—the U.S.-led forces would not win if Taiwan surrendered before U.S.-deployed troops reached Taiwan (Cancian, Cancian, and Heginbotham 2023, 3). While the assumption is subject to debate, both deterrence theory (i.e., convince the adversary that it is best not to launch a war) and the need to win a war (to prevent the adversary from taking over Taiwan, Lee 2022, 173–88) suggest that Taiwan's tangible military capabilities and intangible will to resist are equally important to the prevention of Chinese attacks against Taiwan.

Existing studies have explored various factors shaping Taiwan's public opinion regarding national defense and resolve to fight, including geopolitics (A. H.-E. Wang 2022), U.S. security commitment (Fang-Yu et al. 2019), group identity

(Yeh and Wu 2019), collective actions (A. H.-E. Wang and Eldemerdash 2022), and distributive justice (W.-C. Wu 2023). C. K. S. Wu, Chen, and Yeh (2023) systematically unraveled the factors shaping Taiwanese self-defense and conducted a comprehensive comparison with insights gleaned from existing literature. While these studies have contributed greatly to both theory and practice, most of them presumed a one-to-one relationship between the input and outcome. This approach may overlook intricate relationships among multiple variables behind willingness for self-defense. Furthermore, grasping changes in public opinion regarding national defense is important for policymakers in democratic Taiwan—as they are accountable to the public, such an understanding helps policymakers assess and fine-tune policies. Thus, this paper seeks to contribute to academic and policy analyses by offering an “alternative” source to the preexisting repertoire of national defense data, along with some descriptive analyses.

This paper uses results, particularly the resolve to fight, confidence in ROC armed forces, and confidence in U.S. troop deployment—from the Taiwan National Defense Survey (TNDS) conducted by the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University and commissioned by the Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR), to review core public attitudes toward defense and security in Taiwan. The sections are as follows: section two summarizes the time of collection and sampling method of the surveys, and section three shows the trends in Taiwanese attitude towards defense and security. The last section consists of preliminary findings and a conclusion.

Data Collection

While military and security issues are covered in prominent surveys, such as the Taiwan National Security Survey (TNSS), Public Opinion on Cross-Strait Relations (commissioned by the Mainland Affairs Council), and the TFD Public Opinion Survey, these surveys are not dedicated solely to national defense, so their ability to provide in-depth and time-series analyses is limited. And while media frequently gauges public attitudes on national defense, the quality of the sampling design and questionnaires varies, which limits their application and comparability.

In order to understand Taiwanese attitudes on national defense, and to provide data driven, scientifically-based policy advice, INDSR has commissioned the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University (NCCU) to conduct the TNDS. The survey is tailored to focus on defense-related issues. In addition to thematic or topical defense questions,¹ each survey wave incorporates a set of core questions that assess various crucial attitudes, including the resolve to

¹ For instance, within thematic questionnaires, the TNDS explored various aspects, including the channels through which individuals receive defense information, their engagement in defense affairs, and their perspectives on national defense policies, such as conscription reform, arms purchases, and the development of indigenous weapons. These distinctive inquiries contribute to the uniqueness of the TNDS.

Table 1. Recent Taiwan National Defense Surveys (TNDS): an overview

Date	Survey subjects	N and Method	Institution	Sampling error
Sep. 17–23, 2021	Taiwanese citizens aged 20 or older	Total 1,074, 752 RDD landline, 322 RDD cellphone	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taiwan	±2.99%, 95% confidence interval
Mar. 9–13, 2022	Taiwanese citizens aged 20 or older	Total 1,080, 756 RDD landline, 324 RDD cellphone	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taiwan	±2.98%, 95% confidence interval
Aug. 3–7, 2022	Taiwanese citizens aged 20 or older	Total 1,075, 753 RDD landline, 322 RDD cellphone	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taiwan	±2.99%, 95% confidence interval
Mar. 23–29, 2023	Taiwanese citizens aged 18 or older	Total 1,535, 677 RDD landline, 858 RDD cellphone	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taiwan	±2.50%, 95% confidence interval
Aug. 23–27, 2023	Taiwanese citizens aged 20 or older	Total 1,089, 766 RDD landline, 323 RDD cellphone	Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taiwan	±2.97%, 95% confidence interval

Note: Random digit dialing (RDD) is a type of survey sampling method where telephone numbers are randomly generated and dialed.

Source: the authors

fight, confidence in Taiwan's national military, the U.S. security commitment, etc. In terms of research design, it is a repeated cross-sectional study, which allows us to observe the changing trend of public opinion across time.

The data used in this article were all derived from five waves of telephone interviews conducted by the TNDS between 2021 and 2023, and a brief description of the data used in this study can be found in [Table 1](#) below. Successful interviews were weighted according to the proportions of gender, age, educational attainment, and place of residence of the national population reported by the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of China (MOI), and the sample characteristics did not differ significantly from those of the population. The maximum possible sampling error of each wave of the survey was estimated to be within $\pm 3\%$ at a 95% confidence level.

Findings

1. More than half of Taiwanese expressed confidence in the military's self-defense capability

TNDS used the question “Are you confident in the ability of our nation's military to defend Taiwan?” to gauge respondents' attitudes. [Figure 1](#) shows responses across different points in time. At the time of the first wave of the surveys (September 2021), the proportion of respondents who said they were “confident” or “very confident” together was about 58%. In the second wave

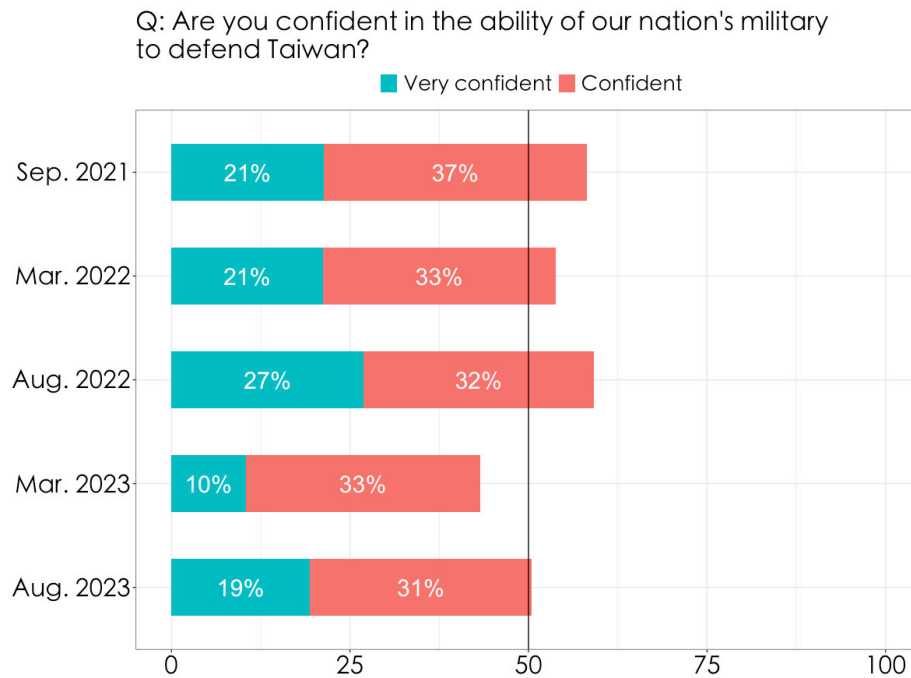


Figure 1. Respondents' Confidence in Taiwan Military's Ability to Defend Taiwan (2021–2023)

Note: The percentages for individuals expressing unconfident, very unconfident, or providing responses such as “don't know,” “no opinion,” “it depends,” or “refuse to answer” are not displayed.

Source: TNDS 2021–2023

of the surveys (March 2022), respondents' confidence in the defense capability of the military dropped slightly to 54%. The third wave of the surveys (August 3–7, 2022) coincided with Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and the CCP's military drills, and the results showed that PLA intimidation did not affect respondents' confidence. But at the time of the fourth wave of the surveys, which was taken in March 2023, respondents' confidence had dropped, for the first time below 50% (to 43%), and the proportion of those not confident exceeded that of those confident. While such a drop could be attributed to various factors and may only be temporary, we think it may be a result of cognitive warfare and negative news coverage of the ROC armed forces. For example, a report in *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* in February of that year claimed that 90% of retired officers have spied for China (Lu, Wu, and Hetherington 2023); in early March, soldiers stationed in Kinmen defected to Xiamen, which led to the rise and circulation of negative news about Taiwan's military (J. Wang 2023). Finally, on August 20, 2023, the PLA organized another military drill after Vice President Lai's U.S. visit. Despite this, the fifth wave of polls showed that the Taiwanese people's confidence in the defense capability of their military had rebounded to around 50%.

2. The public's view was split on U.S. security commitment to Taiwan

TNDS used the question “If there is a war between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait, do you think the United States will send troops to help Taiwan?” to measure respondents' views on U.S. security commitment to Taiwan. The

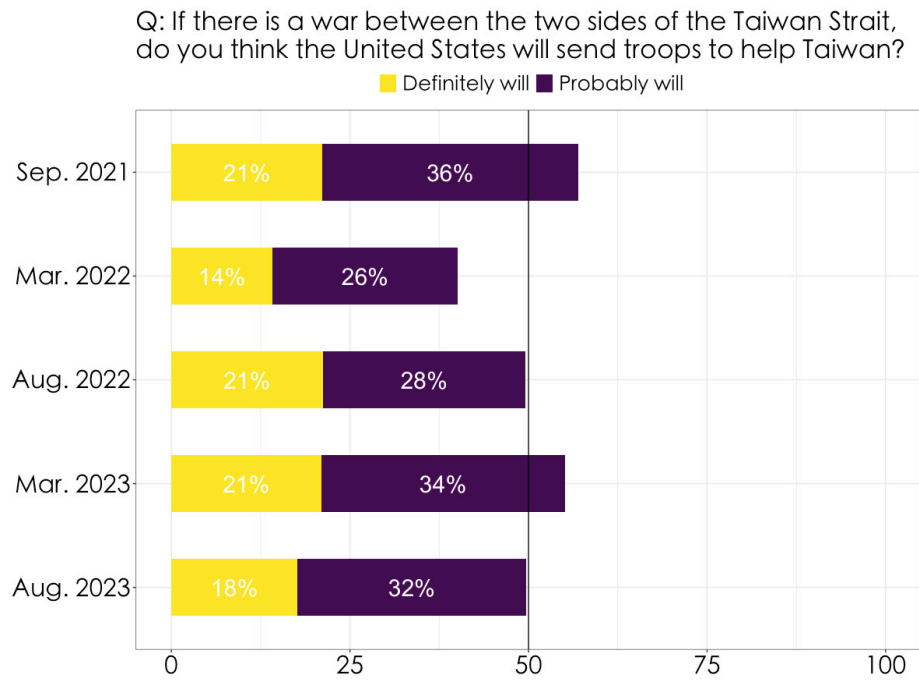


Figure 2. Public View on U.S. Security Commitment to Taiwan (2021–2023)

Note: The percentages for individuals expressing probably won't, definitely won't, or providing responses such as "don't know," "no opinion," "it depends," or "refuse to answer" are not displayed.

Source: TND 2021–2023

results are shown in [Figure 2](#). In the first survey (September 2021), about 57% believed that the U.S. would probably or definitely send troops to help Taiwan in the event of an invasion. The proportion of those believing that the U.S. would send troops to Taiwan was about 40% in the second survey (March 2022), which was about a 17 percent decrease—the Russian-Ukrainian war had just broken out at the time the survey was taken, and the U.S. was seen providing weapons and equipment instead of deploying troops to Ukraine. For the first time, it was observed that the proportion of those who did not think the U.S. would deploy troops (49%) was higher than those who thought it would. However, when U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022, the percentage of those believing that the U.S. would deploy troops to help Taiwan rebounded to 49%, a result that is consistent with research findings that visits by high-level U.S. officials to Taiwan boost public confidence (A. H.-E. Wang et al. 2023). The percentage of those who thought the U.S. would deploy troops to Taiwan continued to rise slightly in the March 2023 survey, to about 55%. In the most recent wave of surveys (August 2023), the percentage dropped slightly to 50%. Overall, previous surveys have shown that public opinion in Taiwan was split on whether the U.S. would deploy troops to help defend Taiwan.

3. The majority of respondents show strong resolve to defend

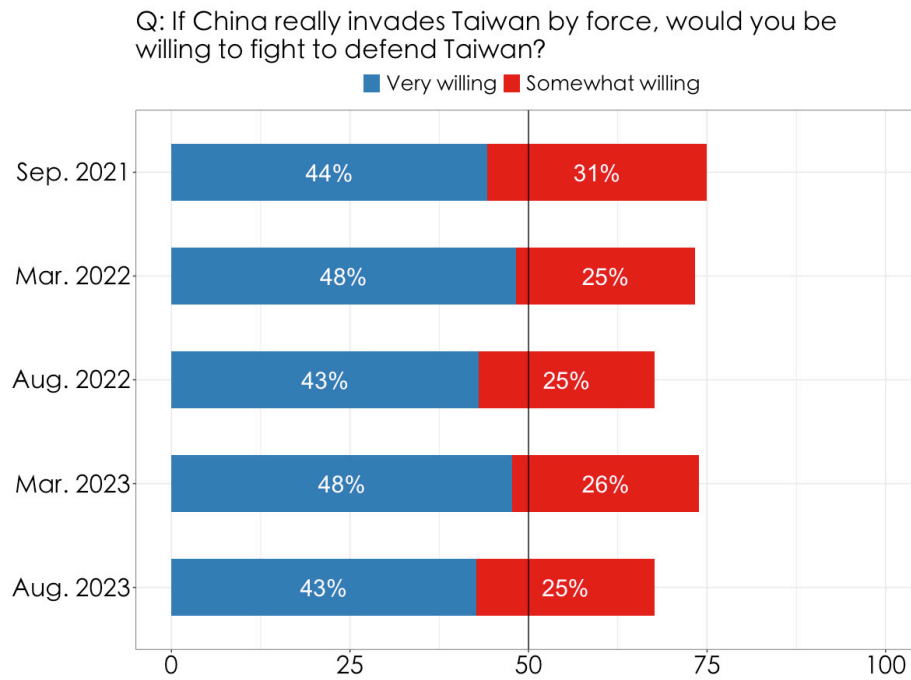


Figure 3. Public Willingness to Fight Against the Enemy (2021–2023)

Note: The percentages for individuals expressing unwilling, very unwilling, or providing responses such as “don’t know,” “no opinion,” “it depends,” or “refuse to answer” are not displayed.

Source: TNS 2021–2023

As for the question “If China really invades Taiwan by force, would you be willing to fight to defend Taiwan?”, [Figure 3](#) shows that in the first wave of the survey (September 2021), about 75% of the respondents answered “very willing” or “somewhat willing,” and after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, in the March 2022 survey, about 73% of the respondents indicated that they would be willing to fight for Taiwan, indicating that public determination to defend Taiwan did not waver. The percentage dropped to 68% in August 2022, suggesting that the live-fire and military drills conducted by the PLA after Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan had the effect of deterring Taiwanese. However, such an effect did not last, as the March 2023 survey showed that Taiwanese willingness to defend had rebounded to 74%. In the latest survey (August 2023), the percentage dropped again to 68%. All in all, although Taiwanese willingness to fight against the enemy may fluctuate due to external factors such as large-scale military exercises, Taiwanese resolve to fight in the event of Chinese invasion has remained more or less stable.

4. Taiwanese willingness for self-defense: a complex interaction

We use parallel plots to visually present the complex interactions among people’s political party identification, attitude towards U.S. security commitments, confidence in the Taiwanese military’s ability to defend Taiwan, and willingness for self-defense. Briefly speaking, parallel plots depict the proportional flow of information by sorting multiple variables on the x-axes to observe how the features in our data set are connected. [Figure 4](#) comprises

parallel plots utilizing data from each wave, most of which display a consistent pattern. First, political party identification has a strong impact on respondents' views on U.S. security commitment. However, as revealed in the second wave of the survey, the U.S. government's decision to abstain from deploying troops in the Russo-Ukrainian War has diminished Taiwanese confidence in U.S. security commitments, irrespective of respondents' party affiliation. The latest wave (August 2023) showed that about one third of respondents identified as Pan-Blue supporters believed the U.S. would deploy troops to defend Taiwan, and nearly 90% of Pan-Green supporters believed that the U.S. would deploy troops, while about half of the respondents identified as nonpartisan believed that the U.S. would send troops to Taiwan.

Second, respondents' perception of U.S. security commitment and confidence in the Taiwanese military's ability to defend are highly correlated in almost every wave. Among those who believed in U.S. deployment of troops to Taiwan, about three quarters exhibited confidence in the Taiwan military's ability to defend. On the other hand, among respondents who did not think the U.S. would send troops to defend Taiwan, three quarters were not confident in the defense ability of the Taiwan military. This phenomenon suggests that when Taiwanese people evaluate the island's defense, they consider the combined capabilities of their military and the U.S. military.

Last but not least, the Taiwanese public's views of the Taiwanese military's ability in turn shapes its resolve to fight. If China invades Taiwan, the majority of the respondents who expressed confidence in the Taiwanese military also showed willingness to defend Taiwan, even when they believed the U.S. would not deploy troops to help. For respondents who were not confident in the Taiwanese military's ability, it depends—their willingness to defend was relatively lower if they believed that the U.S. would not deploy troops to help Taiwan. This pattern held up across all survey waves.

Conclusion

Sixty-five years ago, in the war known as the 823 Artillery Bombardment, the PLA attacked and bombarded Kinmen for months. The Taiwan Strait has remained stable since then, thanks to the fierce resistance of the Taiwanese military along with the assistance of the U.S. military. But peace may be disrupted anytime soon, as Xi Jinping no longer hides his ambition to retake Taiwan, and the PLA has rapidly improved its capabilities to move towards the goal of complete reunification of the “Chinese Motherland.” Taiwan, regarded as the “most dangerous place on earth” (Economist 2021), may indeed become the center of another military conflict soon. Taiwan has been able to live in peace not because of the kindness of the CCP, but because of two conditions—the strong resolve to fight among the Taiwanese population, and the security promises made by the U.S. As tensions escalate in the Taiwan Strait, we need to be more wary of authoritarian China's actions, as the risks



Figure 4. Parallel Plots of Partisanship, Perceptions of U.S. Commitment to Taiwan, Confidence in Taiwan's National Military, and Willingness to Fight, by Survey Wave

Note: Responses such as "don't know," "no opinion," "it depends," or "refuse to answer" are excluded.

Source: TNSD 2021–2023

of miscalculation are high. With that in mind, we should prepare for the possibility of war, and show strong resolve to defend Taiwan, as it is crucial to help us avoid war, deter it, or if war does happen, achieve victory.

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