

# The US Role in Taiwan's Defense Reforms

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Remarks by Dr. Michael Pillsbury February 29, 2004, ITDSS Conference, Taipei[1]

First, I want to thank the Institute for Taiwan Defense and Security Studies for inviting me to Taipei to discuss the US role in Taiwan defense reform. I will try to answer the questions you have posed, and to avoid discussing the subjects you have assigned to the many other speakers. I want to acknowledge the presence here of the Institute's founder Dr. Michael Tsai who has been doing an excellent job as the deputy director of TECRO in Washington DC, and played a major role when he was in the Legislative Yuan in drafting and promoting defense reform. Also, the presence of the former defense minister of the Republic of Korea, and military leaders from several other nations promises a fruitful discussion.

Now, it is important to point out that I am just a private citizen, not a US official, and my comments today do not represent anyone but myself. My purpose is to describe the US role as best as I can, so I will be using the public testimony of senior US officials to illustrate all my points. I am not a critic of US policy, and I do not have any new and exciting recommendations of my own to make. I am speaking today more as a historian of what has happened so far. And this is an important story.

"President Chen Understands This Danger"

I will return to the subject of why the US has played a role in Taiwan's defense reform, but first I want to set the context of this issue. AIT Director Doug Paal put it very well when in a speech [posted at [www.ait.org](http://www.ait.org) September 30, 2003] he said, "the Taiwan Strait remains one of the world's most dangerous flash points and preventing conflict there remains a vital US national security concern." In the same speech, the AIT Director provided the context for my comments today. He said, "President Chen Shuibian has demonstrated that he understands this danger, and we salute his recent initiative to enhance Taiwan's self-defense capabilities." I too am going to praise the remarkable progress Taiwan has made in defense reform, in eight specific areas. I will say very little about China and the PLA today. But I agree completely with AIT Director Paal's strong words "We are hopeful that China will not slide back to a stance of confrontation. But until Beijing abandons its authoritarian political structure and forswears the use of force in the Taiwan Strait, it would be irresponsible for either Taipei or Washington to let down our guard."

A Chronology of the US Role

It might be most helpful to our two days of discussions for me to provide a specific list of what the US role has been since 1997. I say this for two reasons. I have never seen such a list before, and a scholarly debate and discussion of Taiwan defense reform, which our host has in mind for us to do, ought to start with a few basic facts before we get into the issues of interpretation. Second, I think my chronology may surprise you, because the story begins when the seeds of defense reform were planted during the administrations of President Clinton and of Lee Teng-hui, the Democrats and the KMT. Republican President George W. Bush and Chen Shuibian have gone much further and made more remarkable progress, but they had a solid foundation on which to build. My chronology may also surprise you because I will highlight how the views of some US China experts who still oppose a US role in Taiwan's defense reform have been rejected repeatedly, but their opposition continues.

The First Step – The Monterey Talks

The first breakthrough was a decision to meet in Monterey California in December 1997 with Taiwan's military and civil leadership for strategy discussions, but to avoid discussing arms sales. "Software, not hardware" was the slogan. There have now been nine rounds of these Monterey Talks. Participants on both sides have said that remarkable progress was made in mutual understanding and that defense reform was an important subject. Just as Doug Paal said he "saluted" Chen Shuibian's initiatives to enhance defense, I want to salute the roles of Kurt Campbell, Randy Shriver [now Deputy Assistant Secretary of State] and especially of Mark Stokes in taking this first, vital step. On the Taiwan side, Lt General Herman Schwai, Generals Fu Taixing and Liu Xiangbin, a young staff officer named Yu Hsiao-pin ("Yu'ster"), and several civilians made significant efforts. Randy Shriver and Mark Stokes, head of the Pentagon's China desk, have continued to play the key roles in the US effort to support defense reform here.

The Second Step – The Talks on the Strategic Planning Process

In 1998, the second major step was the quiet visit of a special DOD delegation to Taiwan headed by the acting [now permanent] deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy. General Tang Fei invited this DOD team to present to a group of more than 70 Taiwan military officers key US concepts of the role of civilians in developing military plans and the process of developing national military strategy. Concepts of Net Assessment [Integrated Threat Assessment] and strategic planning were discussed in detail. It was apparent from the personal sponsorship of General Tang Fei that Taiwan would one day set

up these two offices. And today they exist and both are an important part of defense reform. Some Taiwan officers now even say these two new offices are too small and need to be expanded so the planning process will move faster. That is a long way in a few years.

### The Third Step – The Survey Teams

In 1999, the third major step came after a shift in US thinking about how to obtain information about Taiwan's defense priorities. A simple but brilliant idea was to send US military "operators" to talk to Taiwan's "operators" in the field and at bases, free of policy constraints or prejudices about Taiwan's capabilities to master new systems. These US military teams began in 1999, and focused on Taiwan's three key warfighting areas – air defense, anti-submarine operations, and counter-landing operations. Eventually we saw the dispatch of more than a dozen highly sophisticated DOD military survey and assessment teams to assess Taiwan's weaknesses and military needs in all relevant sectors. They left their recommendations with Taiwan military authorities as well. Over time, nearly 300 such recommendations accumulated, which Taiwan began to address as a part of reform.

Prior to this initiative to send so many first-time military survey teams to Taiwan, it is a little mysterious how decisions to deny or delay weapons sales had been made since the passage of the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979. In spite of the Taiwan Relations Act that requires maintaining Taiwan's self defense capability, it was well known that many, perhaps even the majority, of Taiwan's requests to purchase expensive US weapons had been denied, in some cases for many years, and without explanation to Taiwan or to the US Congress. For example, the sale of 150 F-16s that finally occurred in 1992 had come only after a decade of urgent requests from Taiwan, without a single US survey team visiting the island. Similarly, diesel submarines had been called "offensive" and denied for a decade, until after the visit of an expert survey team in 2000, and the subsequent approval of submarines in 2001. Taiwan's request for Apache attack helicopters had been seen as unnecessary and "offensive" too, and this finding too was reversed after a survey team visit. I emphasize that these more than a dozen teams of US military officers met extensively with Taiwan military officers at their bases and units, and were real surveys rather than conference room seminars or abstract policy discussions. Both sides said that this had not been done before. Taiwan had been too isolated. There was still a limit, of course, in that no admirals or generals came with these teams. Some US China experts claimed that the rank of general officers might offend China. Eventually, this limit will have to be crossed as well.

### Synergy Among the First Three Steps

My point here is that there was a synergy among these three steps. All three required much closer and more frequent consultations between the US military and the Taiwan military of a type that some US China experts had argued should be ruled out of bounds by the terms of the normalization of relations between the US and the PRC in 1979. This view was rejected. The increased consultation between Taiwan's forces and teams of US operational officers ended the monopoly on contacts with Taiwan's military being infrequent and being managed solely by security assistance authorities and retired officers assigned to the American Institute in Taiwan.

After 1999, the effect of these assessment and survey teams was magnified by the annual Monterey Talks, which began to include as many as 20 substantive experts on each side and to last several days. At the same time, after 1999, the continuing US defense dialogue about the issues of strategic planning and integrated threat assessment was enhanced, based on the foundation laid in December 1998 by Andy Hoehn and his team. Experts affiliated with the DOD Office of Net Assessment began to visit in 1998 as well, and to encourage Taiwan to develop such an analytic capability.

Now, these first three initiatives may sound in retrospect like common sense, but many at the time opposed them. It is important to note that these DOD initiatives in 1997-1998 were taken in spite of the calls of many US China experts for a multi-year moratorium or at least a pause in major arms sales, and clear limits on too frequent contacts with Taiwan military. This recommendation was clearly rejected. The view was seen as silly that such contacts would somehow restore the Mutual Security Treaty with Taiwan from which the US had withdrawn in 1979.

### Too Little, Too Late?

Some critics said these three steps were too little, too late. The PLA missile buildup that began slowly in the early 1990s accelerated by 2000. The missile firings in 1996 that bracketed Taiwan which Secretary of Defense Perry called "reckless" were followed by large PLA exercises in later years. The US Congress not only passed a resolution calling for missile defense to be sold to Taiwan, but began to demand the US DOD make public annually any increase in the threat to Taiwan from China. There had never been such a reporting requirement before. The DOD reports to Congress suggested the balance was shifting against Taiwan and even listed weaknesses in Taiwan's defense.

### The Fourth Step – Reforming the Arms Sales Process, Raising Civilian Control

In April 2001, the US took the fourth major step in its role of supporting defense reform on Taiwan. It announced that arms sales would not just be discussed for one day a year, but on a rolling basis, as needed. At the same time, the US decided to approve most major weapons systems that Taiwan had requested in prior years in a single dramatic batch. In a related development, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz flew to Florida to meet privately with Defense Minister Tang Yaoming at a conference of the US Taiwan Business Council. Again, Mark Stokes and other experts attended, and the press was told that civilian control of the military was a major subject the US side discussed.

### The Fifth Step – Recommending Defense Priorities - C4ISR and Missile Defense

Gradually in 2003, a fifth step became apparent. The US publicly recommended that Taiwan focus on certain key priorities in its defense spending. These priorities were specific. This had never happened before. For example, take the controversy over missile defense for Taiwan. Several senior US officials between 1995 and 1998 were publicly skeptical. Eventually, the US DOD officials publicly urged that investment into a basic missile defense architecture become a defense priority for Taiwan.

A second example of the US publicly and directly urging a new priority for Taiwan's military occurred in the January 2003 speech by the senior DOD manager for Asia who recommended a new command and control system to enhance the jointness among all Taiwan's forces. This project has not yet actually been implemented, but it is clear from several public speeches by DOD officials that there is no higher priority. And that Taiwan had been progressing far too slowly in command and control and protection of these assets from missile attack.

I would like to emphasize strongly that this US suggestion is not just common sense. Everyone knows forces should have good command and control. There is another factor involved, which was clarified a year later when a senior DOD official testified publicly that Taiwan's own interoperability among its forces in command and control would bring a major new benefit – the ability of Taiwan to begin to cooperate with the US forces and other potential security partners if necessary in wartime. Once again, the advice of some US China experts had been rejected who had wrongly invented a false straw man, crying wolf that interoperability would somehow be equivalent to restoring the Mutual Security Treaty with Taiwan and deeply offend Beijing. The DOD public testimony of February 6, 2004 stated clearly, and I quote, "We also suggest that Taiwan enhance interoperability among its Services, and with the United States and other potential security partners."

#### The Sixth Step – Praising Taiwan's Progress in 8 Areas

As I see it, there is a sixth step that began to be taken in recent months. It has been to praise Taiwan rather lavishly for the remarkable progress that it has made in the years since 1997, and especially since the implementation began of the new laws that passed in 2000. This praise for Taiwan's progress has also been offered by State Department officials and by AIT in public speeches. Obviously, by 2003 and this year, senior officials have taken stock of Taiwan's progress and realized that what took the US fifty years – the 1947 act that set up a Defense Department, and an NSC – has been accomplished in only three years in Taiwan. Taiwan is scheduled to implement on time its law requiring one third of the newly empowered Ministry of National Defense to be civilians. The NSC and MND of Taiwan are at work to produce the first public national security strategy document.

The praise was specific, not mere politeness. For example a senior DOD official testifying in public to the US China Commission February 6, 2004 listed eight specific examples of Taiwan's remarkable progress. Let me quote all eight:

1. Taiwan is developing an integrated national security strategy; joint doctrine; and integrated capabilities for training, employing, and sustaining joint forces.
2. Taiwan has succeeded in focusing attention on critical steps that must be taken in order to enhance Taiwan's defense in the next 3-5 years.
3. For the first time in 10 years, Taiwan has increased its defense budget as a proportion of its gross domestic product.
4. It has taken positive steps to modernize its C4ISR system, and
5. Taiwan is undercutting the political and military utility of the PRC's most effective means of coercion -- its growing arsenal of increasingly accurate and lethal conventional ballistic missiles and ever more capable submarine force. It has invested in passive defense systems,
6. Taiwan has streamlined its military force,
7. Taiwan has addressed pilot shortages, and
8. Taiwan has drafted and implemented a detailed plan for the recruitment and retention of civilian personnel..

So, those are the six steps. Obviously, that is not necessarily the whole story of the US role in Taiwan's defense reforms. Additional steps may well have been taken that should remain to be discussed at a future conference. Both sides have told the press the details of US-Taiwan cooperation must not be publicly disclosed.

#### Six Reasons for the US Role in Defense Reform

Let me conclude by making six points about why the US has played this role in defense reform in Taiwan. All six points are drawn from public testimony by DOD in 2004.

First, the PRC's ambitious military modernization casts a cloud over Beijing's declared preference for resolving differences with Taiwan through peaceful means. Taiwan faces an increasingly powerful PRC with an accelerated military modernization program aimed at improving its force options versus Taiwan, and deterring or countering United States military intervention. As the PRC rapidly modernizes its military in order to provide its leadership with credible options for the use of force, Taiwan's relative military strength will deteriorate, unless it makes significant investments into its defense.

2. As the PRC accelerates its force modernization program, Taiwan remains isolated in the international community, especially in the area of security cooperation. Although several states quietly collaborate with Taipei on security matters, the United States stands alone in its political courage, strategic imperative, and sense of moral responsibility in assisting the security of Taiwan's democracy.

Taiwan's defense establishment faces a wide array of other challenges as it attempts to keep pace with developments across the Taiwan Strait. Opinion polls consistently indicate a lack of popular concern about attack from China, so Taiwan is faced with an increasingly constrained defense budget. Over the last 10 years, Taiwan's defense budget has shrunk in real terms and as a proportion of its gross domestic product (GDP).

Taiwan's challenges are serious, but not insurmountable. Our defense relationship with Taiwan seeks to reverse negative trends in its ability to defend itself, possibly obviating the need for massive U.S. intervention in a crisis, and allowing Taiwan's political leaders to determine the island's future from a position of strength.

If deterrence fails, Taiwan, supported by the U.S. and its allies, must be prepared to swiftly defeat the PRC's use of force.

The PLA's growing sophistication, including its efforts to complicate U.S. intervention, calls for more consistent strategic harmonization between the U.S. and Taiwan to improve Taiwan's ability to defend itself and reduce the danger to U.S. forces should intervention become necessary.