



## INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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### CROSSING THE CIVIL-MILITARY DIVIDE: STRUCTURING A CIVILIAN ROLE IN TAIWAN'S DEFENSE POLICY, 2000 – 2008

#### SYNOPSIS

In 2000, the election of opposition politician Chen Shui-Bian as Taiwan's president upended five decades of rule by the Kuomintang Party, and an era of tight military control over defense decision making. Chen had long favored reforms to increase civilian participation in the areas of defense policy, strategy, and procurement. Now he faced the tough task of implementing a new law that called for restructuring the Ministry of National Defense and placing a civilian defense minister into the chain of command. The new president confronted strong opposition from officers, many of whom resisted the increased presence of civilians in the formulation of policy. During the next eight years, Chen's efforts sharply increased the number of nonmilitary personnel at the ministry and created new opportunities for civilian influence and oversight. Chen turned the National Security Council, an organization within the presidency that previously had held little influence, into an effective advisory and policy coordination unit. His administration also introduced an annual political–military joint exercise that increased civilian officials' defense capability and preparedness.

*Tristan Dreisbach drafted this case study based on interviews conducted in Taipei, Taiwan, in February and March 2016. Case published June 2016.*

#### INTRODUCTION

The year 2000 marked a sea change in Taiwan's civil–military relations. Chen Shui-bian, whom military leaders once considered an enemy of the state, was now president and commander in chief.

Chen was a well-known opponent of the Kuomintang, the political party that had governed Taiwan since before the new president was born. The Kuomintang had its roots in China's nationalist government, which Mao Zedong's

Communist Party drove from the mainland in 1949. Led by army general Chiang Kai-shek, the nationalists set up a military-dominated regime on Taiwan, claiming it was the legitimate government of China. Political leaders continued to call the island the Republic of China.

The armed forces in Taiwan had one clear goal: to survive a potential attack from across the Taiwan Strait. The island was only 130 kilometers from the mainland, and the communist government in Beijing made no secret of its wish

to reintegrate Taiwan into a unified China. The ever-present existential threat meant that the military was a dominant presence in Taiwanese life.

After Chiang died in 1975, the Kuomintang Party's grip started to ease. By the 1980s, young activists began to speak out against the one-party system and advocate for recognition of Taiwan as an independent country. The military's political commissar system, an extension of the Kuomintang within the armed forces, responded with a propaganda campaign about the dangers of opposition parties. Military leaders told their soldiers that proindependence activists were enemies of the state.

One of the most prominent proindependence activists was Chen, a leader of the Democratic Progressive Party. He had won a seat in parliament in 1990, called for greater civilian control over defense policy, and drafted a defense reform bill that the parliament later rejected.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Western countries, including Germany and the United Kingdom, met with officials to discuss how Taiwan could move closer to the NATO model, under which civilians at the Ministry of National Defense led defense policy making and military force development.

In January 2000, the parliament passed two laws that restructured Taiwan's defense institutions, although the laws delayed implementation until March 2002. Among other things, the legislation moved key functions from the military's general staff (the group of officers and enlisted personnel responsible for military administration, logistics, and operations) into Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense and placed a civilian defense minister into the chain of command above the military's top officers.

Chen's administration had to implement reforms and assert new norms of civilian control. The long history of Kuomintang influence within the military, along with hostility to Chen and his party, meant that implementation would not be easy. The question was how to build internal government support for the changes, create the capability needed, and expand the scope of civilian influence over defense policy.

## THE CHALLENGE

Chen's administration had to implement the 2000 defense reform laws in a difficult political context. Chen was the first member of the Democratic Progressive Party—which advocated formal independence from mainland China—to hold the island's highest office. He expected his efforts toward exerting civilian control over the military and over defense policy to encounter significant resistance from officers who had long-standing ties to the Kuomintang.

Chen had won a close election in 2000, and his victory had been possible only because the Kuomintang vote had split between the official party nominee and a rival Kuomintang politician who ran independently. To buttress his weak political position, Chen included several Kuomintang politicians in his cabinet. Although the parliamentary election that followed in December 2001 gave Chen's party a plurality, the Kuomintang still could block legislation because it formed a majority coalition with another party.

The legislative effort that produced the defense reform laws in 2000 had begun in late 1998, when an air force general asked a small group of civilians and officers to research reforms and present a draft that the ministry could submit to parliament. Looking to the United States and the United Kingdom as primary examples, the ministry's 1999 draft legislation shifted planning, strategy, and armed-forces-building functions from the general staff and placed those functions into a civilian-led defense ministry. "We wanted to have more civilian control, and we wanted to enhance joint operations," said Chen Ching-Pu, a retired army officer who was one of the drafters.

The legislation moved several policy functions from the military's general staff to the defense ministry. The drafters thought that taking policy functions that had been divided between the service branches in the general staff and unifying them in the defense ministry would reduce service rivalries over allocations of funding and resources. The move also freed commanders in the general staff to focus their energy on getting units ready for combat rather than bicker over money and

manpower. The legislation created new units in the defense ministry that would handle tasks such as anticipating potential conflicts, analyzing the military's ability to meet strategic goals, buying arms from abroad, and developing an indigenous arms industry.

But assigning management and resource allocation functions to the defense ministry meant that military officers in the general staff would lose power and influence over important policy and planning decisions. At the same time, greater civilian leadership over defense policy—especially under President Chen's opposition party—could change Taiwan's strategic goals and shift the balance of power among the service branches (army, air force, navy, and military police).

President Chen had to establish a new norm of civilian control over defense institutions. The new laws called for civilians rather than the general staff to lead decisions about Taiwan's strategic goals, defense planning, and military procurement. The legislation also placed a civilian minister of defense into the chain of command between the president and the chief of general staff, who was the highest-ranking officer in the military. Prior to 1999, most defense ministers had been active-duty officers.

The laws also more than doubled the number of authorized defense ministry staff to 570 from 224 and mandated that one-third of ministry employees be civilians rather than active-duty officers. Of the ministry's 224 personnel, only 28, or 12.5%, were civilians.<sup>1</sup> The ministry, responsible for a military that numbered about 600,000 active-duty personnel, provided basic administrative support for the military and had no policy or planning units. As a result, the ministry served merely as a rubber stamp for planning and procurement decisions made by the general staff. "All the money was with the chief of general staff, not with the minister," said Alexander Huang, a defense analyst with the Chinese Council of Advanced Policy Studies who served as deputy minister of mainland affairs from 2003 to 2004. "The minister's responsibility was to get [funding]

from parliament and give it to the uniformed services."

The changes Chen had to implement clashed with defense institutions' deeply rooted cultures of autonomy. Officers in each service branch usually made procurement and personnel choices without consulting civilians, and they expected the ministry to approve decisions. And even though the parliament's oversight of the defense budget had increased through the 1990s, military policy and procurement processes remained opaque.

The president knew he would face the strongest resistance from army officers, who had the most to lose under a reorganized defense system. The army was the largest and best funded of the service branches and had thrived under the Kuomintang's perspective that Taiwan had to be able to fight a land war against invaders from the Chinese mainland. But Chen believed Taiwan had to be ready to repel any invasion attempt at sea, because the war would be lost if mainland Chinese forces succeeded in landing on the island. And implementing such a sea-defense strategy required more resources for the navy and air force—at the expense of the army.

Further, it was hard to find qualified civilians who could fill positions in the defense ministry. Few people outside the military had expertise in defense policy, and there were no established career paths for civil servants who wanted to work on such issues. With few experienced civilians to choose from, the Chen administration was hard-pressed to recruit more than 150 people to staff the new ministry units required by the reform laws.

Filling the top civilian job in the ministry represented a special challenge. The person who stepped into the role of defense minister had to be able to build influence and engineer contentious changes in both the relationships between the branches of government and Taiwan's organizational culture. Before Chen took office in 2000, the defense minister position had long been a nearly powerless one. "In most aspects of defense policy, "he had no authority," said Yen Tiehlin, a retired army colonel. "He was a

figurehead for the defense establishment.”

“If you really wanted to know how Taiwan will fight and know its defense policy, you didn’t ask the defense minister,” Huang said. “He didn’t know—and had limited power.”

Although the parliament could and did summon the minister for hearings, the same did not apply to the top military leader. “There was an unwritten rule that the top uniformed guy [the chief of general staff] would not sit in the parliament to answer questions” because of concerns that embarrassing questions would harm military morale, Yen said. Nor was the military accustomed to following orders from any civilian other than the president. Although reformers saw little chance of a coup or some other strident military response against planned changes, they anticipated subtler but still significant resistance such as causing bureaucratic delays or making threats of resignation to avoid acting on orders from civilian leaders.

Chen also had to strengthen his primary advisory body on defense issues: the National Security Council (NSC). Formally, the council comprised select cabinet-level officials, but its potential value rested primarily in its secretariat, a team of advisers supported by research and analysis staff. The council, created by Chiang in the 1960s, long had little influence. “The NSC didn’t function at all,” said Chiou I-jen, a cofounder of Chen’s party who ran his 2000 presidential campaign. “It was a kind of honorary position.” President Lee Tung-hui, who held office from 1988 to 2000, began to strengthen the NSC, but when Chen took office, the council was still poorly institutionalized, had only a vague legal framework, and produced no high-level strategy documents to guide the government. In addition, almost half of the approximately 100 staff members on the council were military officers held over from the Kuomintang government. A stronger National Security Council would make Chen a more credible participant in defense affairs by providing him with better advice and creating a potential source of high-level policy leadership.

## FRAMING A RESPONSE

Chen had the authority to make only about 10 political appointments in the defense ministry, including the minister, deputy ministers, and a small group of advisers. But those choices were crucial for the success of reform implementation and for Chen’s efforts to develop support within the military. In Taiwan’s political system, the president, not the parliament, was the key decision maker in ministerial appointments.

For the post of minister, Chen faced a difficult choice. Either he could risk his relationship with the military by appointing a civilian who had little or no military background, or he could appoint a retired military officer as a transitional figure. He chose the second option, continuing a tradition of appointing the outgoing chief of general staff to be defense minister and thereby respecting the letter of the new law, which said only that the officeholder could not be an active-duty officer.

Tang Yiau-ming, an army general who had been chief of general staff since 1999, retired from the military in January 2002 and accepted the post in February. Although Tang was nominally politically independent, he had spent his career in the Kuomintang-dominated military. He had not been closely involved in developing the reform legislation and later became an obstacle in the administration’s implementation efforts.

A civilian face at the top was still important, however, and the defense reform legislation created a new position for just such a person: vice minister of defense for policy. The title was unique, because other ministries had only deputy ministers. In Mandarin, the term for *vice minister* implied a level of authority near that of the minister, said Fu S. Mei, a defense analyst and private consultant specializing in Taiwan’s defense and security. The two positions also received the same salary.

Although the position had important new responsibilities over policy making, the vice minister ultimately reported to the minister. The position oversaw four departments under the

ministry's policy branch: the Strategic Planning Department, the Integrated Assessment Office, a resources department, and a personnel department. Most important, the position was in charge of producing the ministry's defense policy documents. In 2002, the most important of those documents were a publicly available defense white paper produced every other year, a classified force-building document produced every five years, and a 10-year strategic analysis document known as the *defense concept*.

To fill the role of vice minister of defense for policy, Chen chose a trusted political ally. Kang Ning-hsiang, a powerful member of the Democratic Progressive Party, had spent nine years working at the Control Yuan, Taiwan's equivalent of an auditor general or inspector general. Kang had participated in investigations of military activity and knew the armed forces well. His appointment signaled that Chen took the new position seriously and wanted a civilian to play a leading role in the ministry. According to York Chen, a civilian defense specialist who held several posts in the government (no relation to the president), the president hoped Kang would eventually succeed Tang as defense minister.

Lower-level positions in the ministry presented a different challenge because installing more than 150 civilians in the new policy and planning divisions in the defense ministry was impractical in 2002. President Chen had to begin with the expertise already in place by enlisting the help of active-duty military personnel.

The civil service lacked a pool of trained defense experts. Chen's team decided to move policy and planning personnel from the general staff directly into the new units in the defense ministry and then gradually increase the number of civil servants in the new units. In addition to being a practical short-term solution to a capacity problem, the move also kept officers in their jobs, thereby limiting resistance from military personnel.

Chen's choice to lead the National Security Council in 2002 demonstrated his desire to turn the council into a politically powerful institution. He named Chiou, his close political ally, to become

secretary-general of the council. Chiou's political connections and close relationship with the president gave the office a degree of credibility and influence it had lacked.

Chiou intended to strengthen the council and the office of secretary-general to provide the president with better advice. He also wanted to use the council to enhance the president's influence in policy making, including in the defense ministry. To achieve those goals, Chiou had to secure more resources for the council and to involve the council more directly in policy discussions in government.

## GETTING DOWN TO WORK

The Chen administration's reforms focused on two institutions: the defense ministry and the National Security Council. During his first term, the president had sufficient political capital to build coalitions and face down opposition. The close 2004 election, which Chen won by just 23,000 of more than 12 million ballots cast, marked a period of declining capacity for major reform, although changes in practice continued.

### *Moving civilians into the defense ministry*

Officers from the general staff moved to the ministry to work in three new units. The Strategic Planning Department and Integrated Assessment Office were in the ministry's new policy branch, headed by the vice minister of defense for policy. Several other units that had existed in the old ministry structure also moved to the policy branch. The armaments bureau was in a separate branch under a deputy minister, a post filled by an active-duty officer. Most of the divisions within the new units were similar to offices the general staff had before the restructuring, but they now operated in the ministry's policy branch under leadership by the civilian vice minister. And civilians had greater influence over the content of defense policy documents, including external experts who had greater access to the policy-making process.

The strategic analysis and defense policy divisions within the Strategic Planning Department had operated as a single office within the general

staff. Most of the officers who began work in the new units performed tasks similar to those they had performed in the general staff. The transferred officers remained in uniform and were military personnel, not civil servants.

The more difficult challenge lay in increasing the number of civilians in nonappointed staff positions in the ministry. The ministry could target three kinds of civilians: new civil servants seeking entry-level positions, civil servants from other ministries who could transfer to the defense ministry, and officers who could retire from the ministry, take the civil service exam, and serve as civilian staff in the ministry.

Hiring retired officers was the easiest way to increase the number of competent civilians in the ministry. Retired officers had the same employment status as other civil servants. The number of retired officers in the ministry gradually increased after reorganization in 2002.

The first major push to hire civilians with no military background to join the defense ministry came under vice minister Michael Tsai, who succeeded Kang and served in the position from 2004 to 2006. Tsai was a former legislator in Chen's party who had led the committee that drafted the final version of the defense reform legislation. He had no armed-services experience other than one year of compulsory service in 1963 and made recruitment of civilians to the ministry a policy priority. He first recruited civil servants from other ministries by advertising midlevel positions as opportunities for promotion and advancement. Successful applicants got placed in positions that did not require extensive knowledge of military strategy or planning. For instance, civilians in the Integrated Assessment Office handled relationships with other countries' defense institutions and served as liaisons between the ministry and the academic community.

A subsequent push for recruits from other ministries led 30 or 40 new civilians to join the defense ministry. Tsai also sought entry-level civil servants for the ministry and accepted 60 or 70 new employees through that channel.

In the mid-2000s, the ministry offered a short training course to educate incoming civilians about defense issues and defense culture. After the number of incoming civilians had dropped, the ministry stopped offering the course in the late 2000s, Yen said.

By November 2004, the ministry had 167 civilian employees—some with military experience and others with none—compared with fewer than 30 in 2000. Despite the sharp increase, the proportion of civilians still fell short of the one-third goal set in the defense reform legislation, because overall ministry staff expanded to 570. Almost all of the civilian staff served in the policy branch rather than in the armaments branch or general staff.

#### *Strengthening the National Security Council*

When Chiou became secretary-general of the National Security Council in March 2002, President Chen gave him broad latitude to strengthen the organization. "He gave me a lot of room so I could reorganize the structure of the NSC," Chiou said.

Chiou aimed to bolster the council's structure and expand its responsibilities. Looking to the powers of the president laid out in the constitution, he gave advisers specific portfolios for national defense, cross-strait relations with China, and foreign policy. He also appointed a new senior adviser with responsibility for dealing with international organizations. Based on the constitution's provision that the president had authority to deal with emergencies, Chiou stretched his interpretation of that clause and decided that a different adviser should focus on the economy and on finance, which he saw as two areas of potential national emergencies. "Such efforts expanded the scope of the National Security Council," Chiou said. The president formally chose the political appointees in the council staff, but Chiou said Chen usually followed his personnel suggestions.

Chiou also began replacing military personnel in the National Security Council with civilians. At

the beginning of the Chen administration in 2000, 40% of about 100 council staffers were active-duty officers, Chiou said. The Democratic Progressive Party members who joined the council tended to be young by government standards, including a 37-year-old defense adviser.

Chiou left the office in 2003 to work on Chen's reelection campaign but returned to the post for the president's second term in 2004. That year, Chiou secured more funding from the government for the council so he could hire more staff. "In the past, the budget of the NSC was the lowest of any department of the entire central government," he said, at less than US\$70 million.

Only about one in five staffers had research responsibilities, and Chiou wanted more capacity to conduct research and analysis. He received government authorization to expand his roughly 100-member staff by 30 and authorized each of the five senior advisers and three deputies to hire two or three personal research staff. The research was used mainly by the council and the president.

#### *Moving ahead through crosscurrents*

Chen's political position weakened as the hotly contested March 2004 presidential election approached. Although Chen won by a narrow margin, he had lost much of his popular backing. Later in the year, he also lost support in the parliament when his Democratic Progressive Party failed to win enough seats to secure a majority coalition. (As the president's term progressed, corruption allegations involving members of his family further diminished his support. By mid-2006, his approval rating had dropped to 20%, and the Kuomintang led protests calling for his ouster.)

Managing tensions at the top grew steadily more difficult as the president's political influence ebbed. Tang, the former army general who served as defense minister, disagreed with civilian political leaders who favored Taiwan's declaring independence from China, according to York Chen, who was serving in the National Security Council at the time. Tang also opposed the increased power of civilians who had no military

backgrounds. He bristled at the rise of civilian vice minister Kang and he submitted a letter of resignation to the president in 2003.<sup>2</sup>

Tang's resignation letter presented the president with a difficult decision: either accept Tang's resignation or move Kang outside the ministry, where he would be less of a threat to the military's control over the ministry's top post. Recognizing political realities, Chen chose the latter. He replaced Kang as vice minister of defense for policy with a civilian who had fewer political ties, but he kept Kang in the administration by assigning him to the NSC.<sup>3</sup>

Accepting Tang's resignation before the election would have been politically risky because Chen expected a close vote, and removing a high-profile former officer from government might have suggested to voters that relations between the president and the powerful military were deteriorating.

Tang again offered to resign on the day after the presidential election, when the results showed Chen with a narrow win that the Kuomintang contested. This time, Chen accepted Tang's resignation as part of a larger cabinet shuffle. Media reports on Tang's departure quoted former military officers as saying that the military was opposed to Chen's desire for Taiwan to declare its independence.<sup>4</sup>

Unable to count on parliamentary support as his second and final term began, Chen had only one option: to focus on policies that he and his cabinet could implement unilaterally. One such area involved personnel changes wherein he replaced officers and officials in the defense ministry and military leadership. He looked outside the more conservative army and appointed retired navy admiral Lee Jei, who had been chief of general staff, as defense minister. The president reshuffled the army leadership and elevated the positions of navy and air force officers vis-à-vis the army. The net result was that officers who were less political and more loyal to Chen replaced many of the established defense officials from the prereform era.<sup>5</sup>

*New roles for the National Security Council*

Chiou wanted the council to be more directly involved in policy discussions in the defense ministry and to take a greater role in policy coordination. He chose to send delegates from the council directly to ministry meetings and invited ministry staff to attend council meetings.

Chiou focused closely on arms procurement, a field that had been handled by the ministry and joint staff. Arms purchasing was a complicated task for Taiwan, which had formal diplomatic relations with few countries because such ties would anger mainland China. Most arms purchases came from the United States, where a 1979 law required the United States to intervene in the event that mainland China attacked Taiwan. The United States had long encouraged Taiwan to spend more money on defense, but Taiwan generally could not procure the up-to-date weapons systems it desired. The United States often gave older defense products to Taiwan because such deals were less likely to irritate mainland China.

In the past, Taiwan had moved quickly to purchase arms from anywhere that arms became available. That practice, combined with the lack of transparency in the general staff, meant ample opportunities for corruption. The public was aware of that danger because they'd known of high-profile scandals, such as one in the early 1990s involving kickbacks in a deal with France.

The president wanted to be directly involved in all discussions with the United States over an unprecedented offer of US\$15 billion in naval and air equipment the administration of President George W. Bush made in 2001. The offer was politically contentious in Taiwan. The opposition argued that the weapons were overpriced, and the Kuomintang alliance had a general interest in obstructing Chen's policies. The government had to manage the partisan divide and interservice rivalries over procurement priorities while talks with the United States continued for three years.<sup>6</sup>

The ongoing meetings with the United States about arms purchases convinced Chiou that the National Security Council was the institution best suited to engage the United States on that issue.

"We sent some delegates from the NSC to join the team of the defense ministry and directly engage in dialogue or encounters with the United States," Chiou recalled. Council members could raise politically sensitive questions in bilateral meetings about the cost of arms packages and the weapons to be delivered.

Sending two or three council staff members to important defense meetings or conferences gave the council—and thus the president's office—a stronger voice in procurement discussions. Chiou said the council also invited defense ministry officials to some of its meetings. "It's bidirectional," he said. "Sometimes we join defense ministry teams, and sometimes defense ministry people join the NSC team." Such delegations moving between the ministry and the council represented breaks with the past, when defense issues were the purviews of the general staff alone.

President Chen also wanted to increase Taiwan's capacity to produce its own armaments, and Chiou made sure the council was closely involved in that issue. Chiou told defense officials that arms procurement decisions had to take into account domestic economic and industrial interests. "At the beginning, the council was kind of dominated by the defense ministry," Chiou said. "The NSC just listened. . . . But step by step, as we learned more, we could make some suggestions [to the defense minister] about the economic perspective."

In addition to arms procurement issues, NSC team members engaged in discussions of defense strategy, training of military personnel, and other areas of defense policy.

Chiou's efforts to involve the council in new issues also went beyond defense matters. Council staff participated in ministerial meetings on economics, South China Sea issues, foreign affairs, and other areas related to national security. Chiou invited ministers to join council meetings and sent council staff to meetings in different units of government.

In 2006, Chiou's National Security Council took on another new task: publishing a National

Security Report. The report was the first and only public document prepared by the council. It forecast the strategic environment in the coming years and provided general strategic guidance for the government. The US National Security Strategy was a major inspiration for the report. The NSC's public document was the product of cooperation between the council, ministers, and the president. The president called a formal meeting of the National Security Council, including the prime minister and other ministers, to approve the report.

Publication of the report marked the first time that Taiwan's presidency had produced a guiding strategic document—something common in NATO member states. In the United States, for instance, the White House releases a National Security Strategy that provides guidance for the Department of Defense and other relevant units of government.

Chiou said there was little follow-up after 2006 because the political situation had deteriorated.

#### *Creating a civilian-led defense exercise*

The most visible and lasting contribution of Chiou's National Security Council was the annual Yushan crisis response exercise, named after Taiwan's tallest mountain. The exercise developed from an idea defense minister Jei had expressed in 2004, according to York Chen. The concept was to hold a large-scale, civilian-led exercise that would include not only the military but also representatives of civilian government ministries and agencies that would have to work closely in the event of an attack. The United States had been conducting such political–military exercises since the 1950s. “Cooperation between different ministries is quite difficult, and that difficulty exposes Taiwan to serious damage,” Chiou said. “We prepared a scenario for the president, and the president made the order.” President Chen “wanted to make the exercise like the real thing,” Chiou said.

In 2005, the president gave the council authority to conduct the first exercise. The chief

architect of the exercise was York Chen, who at the time worked for the vice defense minister but became the council's defense adviser the following year. Civilians controlled the exercise, unlike any similar war games Taiwan had conducted in the past. Chiou's team had the authority to involve different units of government—including the defense ministry—in an operation meant to test Taiwan's ability to respond to an attack by China.

The initial 2005 exercise was small, staged as an experimental war game involving only about 50 participants, including the premier, the chief of general staff, and senior officials from various departments. The Chen administration worried that officers might resist the council's intrusion in an area that had traditionally been the domain of the general staff and the defense ministry. To reduce potential resistance, the administration assured the military that the armed forces could continue holding a separate annual exercise. The council kept a small number of people informed about the details of the exercise. The council refused military offers to help plan the exercise and assured that the council and the defense ministry would coordinate through the office of the civilian vice minister. The president did not participate directly in the 2005 exercise, but the exercise did include the premier, ministers, and the chief of general staff.<sup>7</sup>

In subsequent years, the council greatly expanded the exercise. At least 3,000 officers and officials were involved by the time of the 2008 exercise. The president began participating in the exercise in 2006, overseeing the crisis response as he would in case of an actual attack.<sup>8</sup> The exercises were based on a theoretical threat from China and included problems that had to be solved in real time—for example, dealing with malfunctioning equipment.

The president ordered that the exercises be as realistic as possible, Chiou said. As a political–military exercise, the operation required participation by all units of government that would have to respond to a real threat. Apart from its benefits for Taiwan's crisis preparations, the exercise served the important role of forcing

civilian leaders to engage in defense and security issues. The Yushan exercise meant “more civilian control, more National Security Council control, and more presidential palace control” over defense, said defense and security consultant Mei.

Liu Fu-kuo, executive director of the Center for Security Studies in Taipei, said the exercises involved all relevant ministries and increased civilian awareness, especially public servants’ awareness, of defense and security policy. He also said the exercises improved relations with the United States by demonstrating Taiwan’s defense capacity and showing that the Taiwanese military could work effectively with the United States in the event of an attack from China.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Recruiting and retaining civilians at the defense ministry were continuing challenges because a lingering organizational culture created an uncomfortable work environment, career paths were uncertain, workloads were heavy, and civil servants could easily transfer to other ministries.

Many civilians felt out of place working in an environment in which most of the personnel had military backgrounds. More than in other ministries, following orders and doing things by the book were highly valued. “The ministry is more bureaucratic than others,” said Arthur Ding, a former political work officer during his mandatory two-year military service who later became director of the Institute of International Relations in Taipei. “Low ranks cannot have their own discretion.”

“There’s no reward for taking the initiative,” said Mei. “You’ll be criticized” for not following the rules.

The workloads were also heavier than elsewhere in government, which dissuaded civilians from taking jobs in the ministry. “Everyone works overtime almost every evening,” Ding said. “Transfers from other ministries are not used to this kind of culture.” Mei said he often saw staff at the Strategic Planning Department working until 9 or 10 at night.

Ding and Yen attributed the long hours and heavy responsibilities to understaffing. As Taiwan downsized its military from the 1980s through the 2010s, the military maintained roughly the same number of so-called fighting platforms, such as warships, fighter jets, and tanks. Although the number of personnel in the military in 2016 was about half that in 1985, the size of the actual fighting force had not changed significantly. Cutbacks had hit hard among general staff and defense ministry positions. Because of those cutbacks, duties once performed by five or six people were now performed by two or three.

The workload and the stagnation made the ministry an unappealing place for young civilians to work. “People working in the Strategic Planning Department do not have time to think, to evaluate, or to assess,” Yen said. “There is no innovation, no better solutions because there is very little time to think about things.”

Civilians who moved to the defense ministry from other units of government often did so to advance their careers, and had little motivation to remain in the ministry for an extended time. The open positions in the ministry were mostly higher-level jobs that appealed to civil servants looking to gain promotions. Civilians from other ministries or agencies moved to the defense ministry in part to gain higher civil service ranks, and civil service regulations allowed staff to easily move to another ministry if a job opened up. “The problem derives from when we designed the policy branch,” Yen said. “The civilian jobs were rather high ranking, so we didn’t have entry-level civilian positions for college graduates, for young people who’d just gotten a master’s or PhD.”

The absence of any clear career path in the defense ministry also discouraged entry-level civil servants. “You want to establish a civilian defense official pipeline from the entry level all the way up to vice minister,” Yen said. “You want to ensure that a civilian defense official who comes into the system and serves in a department for three years can move to another department. Let him understand during his service at this institution

that he can learn about strategic planning, about resource allocation, about the budgeting process, about implementation, and most important, about how war fighters think.”

Retired officers filled many civilian posts. Huang said officers had become accustomed to taking ministry jobs when they retired, which made it politically difficult to put civilians without military backgrounds in ministry posts. Yen, a retired army colonel, disagreed, claiming the posts taken by retired officers were vacant because qualified civilians shunned the openings.

Despite the challenges, the Chen administration did make progress in increasing the number of civilians in the defense ministry. The number peaked at about 170 when Tsai oversaw a major recruitment effort, and it slowly decreased after 2006 as civilians left for other jobs. “It has never filled up to 202 civilians,” as called for in the defense reform legislation, Yen said. “The average is 150, 140, or sometimes [as low as] 120. So there are a lot of vacant billets, and that opened the door for a lot of retired officers. Retired officers can fill up all those billets simply because they’ve never been filled by real civilian officials. It’s not the retired officers trying to compete with them.”

As of 2016, more than half of the civilians in the ministry were retired military officers. About 90% of the civilians at the ministry were in the policy branch.

The heads of divisions within the Strategic Planning Department have never been “real civilians,” Yen said. When the reorganization took effect in 2002, all the division heads were active-duty officers. “In the first 10 years, they were mainly uniformed officers, but in the past 4 or 5 years, they’ve been changing” to retired officers.

The administration achieved a milestone in civilian control over defense policy during Chen’s final months in office. In March 2008, after the Kuomintang Party won the presidential election, Chen appointed Tsai as the first civilian defense minister since the restructuring of the ministry in 2002 who had not been a career officer. Tsai had helped draft the reform legislation in 1999, had

served as vice minister of defense for policy, and had been deputy secretary-general of the National Security Council. Chen tasked Tsai with keeping the defense ministry on an even keel during the governmental transition period. China had a history of taking provocative military actions during election periods, and Tsai had to be sure the military was prepared.

Tsai acknowledged the historic role he played as the first defense minister without a military background since the restructuring but said he was frustrated as a caretaker minister with no real authority to implement new defense policies. Tsai was less than three months in office before the new Kuomintang administration took over in May and replaced him.

## ASSESSING RESULTS

The reforms Chen implemented during his two terms in office increased civilians’ influence over the military and civilians’ participation in defense policy making. Policy-making functions moved from the general staff to the civilian-led defense ministry. The proportion of civilians among ministry staff increased. And the National Security Council became a more influential source of policy advice and policy coordination. But despite clear advances, observers viewed the reform process as a work in progress. In 2016, active-duty officers continued to hold important positions in the defense ministry, and the proportion of civilians in the ministry remained below the targets specified in the 2000 legislation.

The most tangible measure of civilian influence was the number of civilians working in the ministry. The proportion of civilians among ministry staff increased from 2002 to 2008 but fell short of the goal of one-third that had been set in the reform laws that parliament passed in 2000. By 2004, civilians held 167 of approximately 600 positions, or about 28%. Prior to the beginning of implementation in 2002, civilians had numbered just 28 out of 224, or about 13%. More important, in 2016, observers and former ministry officials reported that about one-quarter (25%) of positions were held by civilians, indicating that little or no

progress had been made during the preceding 12 years.

Some observers criticized the administrations of both Chen and his successor, Ma Ying-jeou, for not doing more to recruit civilians without military backgrounds into the ministry and for not assuring that those civilians would have clear career paths. As of 2016, interviewees reported that at least half of the civilians in the ministry were former officers. Civilians tended to hold midlevel positions and typically did not stay in the ministry for more than two or three years. That level of turnover limited the ability of civilian staff to develop deep knowledge of the ministry and of defense institutions. “You almost don’t have any civilians in leadership positions except political appointees,” Mei said.

Huang was more optimistic. He said several section chiefs were indeed nonmilitary civilians and that several of those civilians had accrued enough experience to be on the list of candidates for department chief positions. “In the next few years, we will start to see true civilians taking over positions” that have been held by two-star military officers, Huang said in 2016. “It’s a learning curve. Hopefully, by 2020, we will have a good portion of civilians [at the ministry] who can really understand defense affairs. . . . Most of it is learned on the job.”

The presence of retired officers in civilian positions fit the letter of the 2000 defense reform legislation, but some observers raised concerns. “Once you wear a service uniform, you’re always biased,” said Yen, who himself was a retired officer. “You cannot see objectively. You have the burden of your old colleagues, your old boss. Even though you’re retired, you’re influenced by the environment you grew up in.”

Chen waited until the final months of his administration to appoint a civilian without a military background as defense minister. Until 2008, he had placed recently retired officers in the position—a decision that fulfilled the requirements of the 2000 defense reform legislation but fell short of the expectations of some of the law’s drafters. After 2003, when Chen encountered

defense minister Tang’s resistance to the rise of a powerful civilian vice minister, the president chose to appoint outgoing officers to the top post in the ministry.

Under Chen, the vice defense minister position was always held by a civilian with no military background. Tsai, who held the post from 2004 to 2006, said difficulties in communicating with the military-oriented minister limited his ability to shape policy.

Civilian defense specialists who worked outside the defense ministry reported that they gained more access to the policy-making process after 2002. Defense ministry officials provided opportunities for independent experts to review drafts of policy documents and contribute new ideas.

The National Security Council became a much more powerful and influential instrument for presidential control over defense policy during Chen’s eight years in office. The council added research and analysis capacity; exercised a stronger, unified voice in policy matters; and gained more access to the president. The council became an almost entirely civilian-dominated institution, with only a handful of active-duty officers holding a few posts that supported the defense and foreign affairs advisers.

The annual Yushan political–military exercise proved the most lasting contribution by Chen’s National Security Council. The annual exercise gave the civilian-dominated council a leadership role in war gaming and forced high-ranking officials in ministries and agencies to work closely with officers and the presidency in responding to simulated crisis situations. The Ma administration, which governed from 2008 through 2016, continued the Yushan exercise.

The council’s National Security Report fell by the wayside. The Ma administration chose not to produce any new report, and the 2006 edition remained the only example. A Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), which the defense ministry first drafted in 2009, partly filled the function of providing an avenue for presidential guidance on defense policy. The Integrated

Assessment Office, which became the Department of Integrated Assessment several years after the reorganization, was responsible for producing the QDR. “It set priorities for the air force, navy, and army,” said Yen, who in 2008 led the division that drafted the QDR, “for how to budget and implement these forces and looking 20 years ahead, what programs and modernization objectives we need to pursue.” The drafting process for the review involved external defense specialists, and the final draft required multiple levels of approval within government.

The implementation of defense reform legislation from 2002 to 2008 had some success in reducing the autonomy of the military and increasing civilian influence in defense policy decisions, especially in procurement and the content of defense policy documents. The reorganization of the ministry took budgeting, procurement, and personnel decisions away from the general staff. Policy and planning functions that had been divided among the army, navy, and air force were consolidated in the ministry.

The services remained protective of their own interests, however. The service branches had traditionally divided up the defense ministry positions held by military officers, and that practice largely continued through the Chen and Ma administrations, according to York Chen. There were continued disputes between the services over procurement priorities.

## REFLECTIONS

This Taiwan case illustrates that in the event of a threat of resistance or insubordination from the military, civilian presidents may feel reluctant to appoint strong civilians to serve as defense ministers. In a politically contentious environment, an effort to disrupt the status quo could be seen as only increasing the opportunities for criticism of the administration. The case also shows that retired officers may be convenient sources of qualified civilian employees in defense ministries, but hiring them carries a risk that continued loyalty to a service branch would influence decision making.

Extending civilian participation in military policy making was almost inevitably difficult for a simple political reason: voters generally had little interest in defense issues, whereas senior officers did. And a head of state had little prospect of immediate gain and would likely experience a fair certainty of pushback. Chen’s strategy for navigating that difficult problem had both strengths and weaknesses in the eyes of senior decision makers.

The appointment of retired officers to serve as civilian defense minister caused several observers to express concern that that practice had become the norm in Taiwan during the decade after the reform legislation took effect in 2002. Ideally, the minister oversaw the management of the defense ministry and could provide the president with policy advice. But if the chief of general staff spent a career serving under the officer who became minister, that chief of general staff could be reluctant to contradict that officer. The chief of general staff could also be reluctant to speak out against defense policy because of knowing there was a clear path to becoming minister if one did not raise too many disagreements with the sitting minister or the president. In addition, the minister and chief of general staff offered essentially the same background and expertise, leading to less diversity among the president’s key defense advisers.

Observers and former officials had conflicting ideas about whether appointing a “pure” civilian as defense minister was politically feasible for Chen Shui-bian or his successor. Some said such an appointment would raise problems among officers, who might protest by using passive forms of resistance, such as bureaucratic delays or threats of resignation. Others said that that fear on the part of civilian political leaders was unfounded. “They [civilians] worry too much,” said Yen Tiehlin, a retired army colonel who had served in several positions in the policy branch of the defense ministry.

Strengthening the National Security Council to heighten the civilian voice in policy making also carried pros and cons. President Chen chose to use

the council—which was poorly institutionalized and relatively weak—to increase his authority in defense affairs. The policy was largely successful and enabled the administration to gain credibility despite the council’s vague legal framework.

Placing politically powerful people in the council’s top positions and letting them pursue new areas of influence connected the office of the president with defense policy discussions and allowed the president to better coordinate defense policy. However, the drawback of using a poorly institutionalized body that way was that advances could be easily scrapped by the incoming administration, as was the case with the National Defense Report after 2006.

Hiring retired military officers enabled the Chen administration to quickly fill defense ministry posts following the 2002 reorganization, but the policy had potentially negative consequences because the presence of many retired officers in civilian positions within the defense ministry raised questions about their ability to perform their work without bias in favor of their former services. The acculturation or sense of loyalty former officers had developed could make it difficult for them to make objective decisions about how resources should be allocated among services and about the role each service should play in meeting Taiwan’s defense needs. But employing retired officers also had clear advantages: having served in the armed

forces, they had a practical understanding of how military institutions functioned.

The ministry still needed more entry-level jobs with clear civilian career paths. Yen suggested creating a pool of national security civil servants that would include staff in the defense ministry, in the foreign affairs ministry, at the intelligence bureau, on the Mainland Affairs Council, and on the National Security Council. Those staff could move among the units or remain in one unit to develop more-specific skills and knowledge. Yen said there were about 2,000 civil servants in those units. “Bringing in civilians means bringing in different thinking, different ideas, and probably more-objective judgment on military involvement in the future,” Yen said.

Despite reforms’ shortcomings, observers reported that the defense policy-making process had become more open to input from civilians working in defense institutions and from experts working outside government. The Chen administration had increased the authority of civilians in defense institutions, thereby laying groundwork for future advances. Appointing a “true” civilian as defense minister required a president to find value in placing a strong civilian in that role. And the development of a ministry that civilians wanted to work in and that offered clear opportunities to build a career might necessitate further changes to defense institutions.

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