



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on October 17, 2022

## Taiwan Sees Lowest Military Recruitment in 10 Years Amid Low Birth Rates

Taiwan's pool of military conscripts for 2022 will be the smallest in 10 years, as the island faces a population crisis owing to falling birth rates.

Based on estimates from government figures, the total number of conscripts does not exceed 118,000. This number is expected to drop even more, amid threats of an invasion from Communist China.

There will be a "sharp drop" in the number of males who will turn 18 — the enlistment age — in the next couple of years, Taiwan's Legislative Yuan cautioned in an October report as the report urged Taiwan's defense ministry to promptly address the matter.



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According to the CIA World Factbook, Taiwan's approximate fertility rate of just over one child (1.08) per woman in 2022 is the lowest in the world. Such a statistic falls just below South Korea's (1.1) and Singapore's (1.16). In 2021, Taiwan, with a population of 23 million, witnessed a record low of 153,820 registered births. In contrast, there were 196,627 registered births in 2011, a decade earlier. These figures showing Taiwan's dismal population statistics were taken from Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior. Such a phenomenon of falling birth rates mirrors that of [neighboring Japan, another highly developed country](#).

While falling demographic statistics have social and economic effects on countries in general, concerns arise in Taiwan specifically over the impact of falling birth rates on military personnel levels.

Taiwan's military operates on a hybrid recruitment system, with all Taiwanese males having to go through four months of basic military training upon turning 18. Yet the military, with its 180,000-strong active duty cohort, primarily depends on voluntary enlistment.

From 2012 to 2016, the number of men of military conscription age dropped to an average of 168,000 per year, plummeting further to 138,000 in 2017, a government report revealed.

"A military of this size can defend Taiwan for now, but given the increased threats (from China) and the decrease in population, we must prepare (to do more) earlier," Dr. Su Tzu-yun, from the government-funded Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR) in Taipei, admitted to *The Straits Times*.

Dr. Yeh Yao-yuan, director of the Taiwan and East Asia Studies Program at the University of St. Thomas in the United States, highlighted that the island's military personnel levels faced issues far beyond falling birth rates.

"I don't think the pay and benefits are sufficient to recruit young talents," Yeh said, noting that soldiers have not been highly esteemed in Taiwan for a long time.



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The entry-level monthly salary for a new soldier is US\$1,235, about 18 percent less than the island's average salary of US\$1,500, based on a *Time* report in March.

Although there is no immediate panacea to the problems faced by Taiwan's military personnel, one analyst suggested using technology to mitigate the impact of falling conscript numbers.

"Automatic, robotic, and unmanned technologies should be further developed," suggested Dr. Sheu Jyh-shyang, a military specialist at INDSR.

"Unmanned aerial vehicles have already proven their effectiveness in Ukraine and other conflicts.... Similar technologies should receive high priority to support the Taiwanese military's limited human resources," Sheu added.

Taiwan faces the constant threat of a military incursion by China, which claims sovereignty over the territory that Beijing stresses must be reunified with the mainland, by force if necessary.

Such a military threat has increased significantly following U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's perceived provocative visit to Taipei in August. Beijing denounced Pelosi's visit as a breach of its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Hence, in response, Chinese authorities showcased their unhappiness via bellicose and unprecedented military drills around Taiwan, such as flying ballistic missiles over the island. Additionally, Chinese warships and warplanes have persisted in crossing the Taiwan Strait dividing China and Taiwan almost every day.

In light of the increased Chinese aggression in recent weeks, many have urged Taiwan to boost its military and suggest having longer training programs for servicemen.

Data from a March poll by the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation revealed that around 76 percent of respondents aged 20 and older opined that mandatory military service should be increased to one year.

Such propositions to increase the length of mandatory military service may actually materialize in the months to come. Recently, Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng revealed that a statement on prolonging the length of the military conscription would be made by the end of 2022.

"Insufficient manpower in the military is one of the reasons for extending military service.... Four months of service is not enough as threats from the enemy are now severe," Chiu told lawmakers.

In the past, Taiwan's military service requirement was two years. The term was slowly shortened till it reached the four-month period in 2013. After the mandatory conscription period ends, servicemen are typically discharged as reservists, after which they have to participate in at least four refresher training courses, lasting between seven and 14 days, over an eight-year period.

Taipei expects that Beijing will escalate its pugilism towards the island [amid Chinese President Xi's increasing political clout and grip on power](#).

Meanwhile, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen has pledged to boost the island's defenses, also lobbying for the Taiwanese to play a role in the defense of the island.

"Protecting our territory and safeguarding our nation has never been the work of the military alone," Tsai said.

In early September, Taiwan's former top military official issued a somber warning, indicating that the island's armed forces had no clear defense strategy against a Chinese attack.



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Admiral Lee Hsi-ming (Ret.), former chief of the general staff, also indicated in his warning that the president might not understand the conceptual thinking needed to counter that threat.

“Think strategically! Don’t limit yourself to thinking about operational details!” Admiral Lee urged the military as he launched his new book that argues Taiwan must return to the “asymmetric” defense strategy he first unveiled, but had been diluted since he retired three years ago.

Lee praised Tsai for emphasizing the importance of the armed forces more than her predecessors, but there were underlying tones of skepticism in his appreciation for Tsai.

“Does she understand it? I am not sure,” Lee said.

Specialists have asserted that Lee’s alarm highlights the paralysis that has obstructed attempts to bolster Taiwan’s defenses. Such inertia can be traced back to the military’s history as the army of the *Kuomintang*, the Chinese Nationalist Party that ruled the island under martial law for decades. Yet the quest for military reform has assumed a sudden exigency amid mounting Chinese military pressures.

“We have an authoritarian hangover and it has created a problem with civil-military relations, and it may be the most critical problem we have,” said Kitsch Liao, military and cyber affairs consultant for Doublethink Lab, a Taipei-based civil society group.

“The reason is that the military used to be the armed wing of the KMT, just like the People’s Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party.”



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