

TAIWAN'S OVERALL DEFENCE CONCEPT MILITARY POSTURE: A SECURITIZATION THEORY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study analyzes the shift in Taiwan's military posture, a direct response to China's escalating threatening rhetoric and incursions on Taiwan's de facto sovereignty in the latter half of the 2010s. Employing a qualitative analytical approach that relies on a comprehensive examination of primary and secondary sources, this research applies Thierry Balzacq's version of securitization theory (often associated with the 'Paris School'). During Tsai Ing-Wen's presidency, Taiwan's military chief, Admiral Lee Hsi-Min, introduced the Overall Defense Concept (ODC) as the basis for this reform in the armed forces' posture. Our findings indicate that the Tsai Ing-Wen administration faced significant geopolitical pressure from China to continue the previous administration's policy and accept the 1992 Consensus. We hypothesize that Tsai Ing-Wen played a key role in asserting China as an existential threat, thereby laying the groundwork for Taiwan's military posture reform, notably through the strategic appointment of Admiral Lee.

Abstrak

Studi ini menganalisis pergeseran postur militer Taiwan, sebagai respons langsung terhadap retorika Tiongkok yang semakin mengancam dan pelanggaran *de facto* kedaulatan Taiwan pada paruh kedua tahun 2010-an. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif analitis yang mengandalkan pemeriksaan komprehensif sumber primer dan sekunder, penelitian ini menerapkan teori sekuritisasi versi Thierry Balzacq (sering dikaitkan dengan 'Paris School'). Selama masa kepresidenan Tsai Ing-Wen, Kepala Militer Taiwan, Laksamana Lee Hsi-Min, memperkenalkan Konsep Pertahanan Keseluruhan (ODC) sebagai dasar reformasi postur angkatan bersenjata. Temuan kami menunjukkan bahwa pemerintahan Tsai Ing-Wen menghadapi tekanan geopolitik yang signifikan dari Tiongkok agar melanjutkan sikap pemerintahan sebelumnya dan tetap menerima Konsensus 1992. Kami berhipotesis bahwa Tsai Ing-Wen memainkan peran kunci dalam menegaskan Tiongkok sebagai ancaman eksistensial, sehingga meletakkan dasar bagi reformasi postur militer Taiwan, terutama melalui penunjukan Laksamana Lee di posisi strategis.



INTRODUCTION

Contemporary relations across the Taiwan Strait are increasingly viewed as a potential source of regional conflict. To analyze this situation, it's important to reflect on key developments in the past two decades regarding relations between the Republic of China (ROC), or Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China (PRC), or mainland China. A significant event from Taiwan's perspective was the election of Tsai Ing-Wen as president and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) gaining a majority in the Legislative Yuan in 2016. This electoral victory marked a pivotal shift in cross-strait relations. In her first year, Tsai Ing-Wen notably declared that she would not endorse the 1992 Consensus, signaling a break from the previous Kuomintang (KMT) government's policy of closer economic and political engagement with the PRC (Wong et al., 2016). The 1992 Consensus is a longstanding agreement based on a mutual understanding that the territories of both the PRC and ROC are part of one China (Bush, 2016). The prior KMT government had fostered a notably cordial relationship with Beijing, culminating in a 2015 summit between the two presidents in Singapore.

This governmental transition led to a noticeable shift in Taiwan's security and foreign policies. Tsai Ing-Wen and the DPP won the election by promoting a platform contrasting sharply with the previous KMT government, focusing on a new approach to cross-strait relations. The DPP capitalized on declining public opinion toward the KMT, following the previous president's attempts to strengthen economic ties with the PRC (Flynn, 2024). During Tsai Ing-Wen's first term, the Taiwanese military establishment—previously inclined to view the PRC favorably—began to re-evaluate its stance. This change was marked by the adoption of the Overall Defense Concept (ODC), introduced by Lee Hsi-Min, Taiwan's Chief of the Armed Forces (Wuthnow et al., 2022). The ODC was formulated in response to perceived Chinese military superiority and a series of incidents involving violations of Taiwan's territorial sovereignty. This asymmetric defense approach aims to maximize Taiwan's defense capabilities by targeting an invading force at its weakest point, specifically in Taiwan's coastal waters, through the use of smaller and more cost-effective military assets. The ODC divides Taiwan's defense operations into three phases: force preservation, decisive battles in

the littoral zone, and the destruction of enemy forces at the landing beach (Thompson, 2021, p. 3).

Over the last 20 years, scholarly discourse focusing on cross-strait relations has expanded significantly. This evolving strategic landscape, particularly Taiwan's new defensive posture, has also spurred a noticeable shift in scholarly discourse. While a segment of literature produced from this discourse has remained non-academic, a notable body of academic literature has emerged. Early 21st-century scholarly discourse often reflected optimism, predicated upon the burgeoning economic interdependence between Taiwan and the PRC, anticipating an amelioration or sustained amicability in their relations (McDevitt, 2004; Kastner, 2016). However, the advent of the 2010s witnessed a discernible shift in scholarly sentiment, catalyzed by the electoral ascendancy of the DPP in Taiwan and concurrent alterations in PRC's policy vis-à-vis Taiwan. This shift engendered a more pessimistic appraisal among scholars regarding the prospects for a peaceful resolution of cross-strait tensions (Kastner, 2018; Xiyang, 2019). As the trajectory of the 2020s unfolds, the dynamic between Taiwan and the PRC continues its descent into acrimony, prompting scholarly

discourse to pivot towards an examination of Taiwan's growing apprehensions of the perceived threats emanating from mainland China (Cole, 2020; Liu & Tsai, 2021; Wu, 2023; Diamond & Ellis, 2023; Schriver, 2013).

This article seeks to fill an important gap in the academic literature by providing the first in-depth analysis of Taiwan's military posture shift, centered on Admiral Lee Hsi-Min's Overall Defense Concept, as a strategic response to China's escalating pressure in the latter half of the 2010s. We propose that the introduction and adoption of the ODC are part of a securitization process within the Taiwanese military establishment, where an issue previously considered political comes to be framed as an existential threat, thereby justifying extraordinary measures. This article offers a unique analysis of Taiwan's military posture, which combines a securitization approach—traditionally associated with non-traditional security—with a traditional strategic studies approach. By integrating these perspectives, the study will not only analyze the discursive construction of threat but also assess the tangible military responses and their strategic implications.

By examining this securitization process, we will explore factors that explain

how the ROC's military perspective on the PRC has shifted to perceive it as a threat, prompting a change in Taiwan's defensive posture. Key elements of this analysis will include the geopolitical context of rising Chinese assertiveness in the region, the stakeholders influencing changes in Taiwan's security policy, the framing process that constructs China as an existential threat, and the outcomes of the securitization process. The central question we will investigate is: "How did the introduction of the Overall Defense Concept (ODC) lead to the securitization of China as an existential security threat in the eyes of Taipei's defense officials under the Tsai Ing-Wen government?"

Exploring this case is particularly valuable, as the ODC is just one of many indicators of the changing dynamics in ROC's cross-strait relations, especially contrasted against the prior era of rapprochement with the PRC, before Tsai Ing-Wen's presidency (Cole, 2020). While much scholarly attention has focused on political and economic dimensions of cross-strait relations, this article elaborates into a less-explored but crucial aspect: the evolving perspective of Taiwan's military establishment. By focusing on Taiwan's

defense officials as the audience for this securitization, this article aims to shed light on this underexamined dimension. Additionally, historical and geographical factors will be considered in analyzing the Taiwanese perspective. The Taiwan Strait, a vital shipping route for Taiwan's commerce, is only 180 kilometers wide, and just 118 kilometers at its narrowest point, making it a potential hotspot for tensions (Walsh, 2023). This article will also reflect on Taiwan's evolving political culture and civil-military relations.

This article is organized into four sections. First, we provide an introduction of the topic and an overview of the existing literature on the security situation in the Taiwan Strait. The second section explains the theoretical framework of Balzacq's securitization theory. The third section discusses the methodology used in this study, including data collection and analysis. The fourth section presents the results, which are divided into four parts: the application of securitization theory, the geopolitical context, domestic securitizing actors identified, and the outcomes of adopting ODC. The conclusion summarizes the findings and their implications for contemporary cross-strait relations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Balzacq's Securitization: Beyond the Speech Act

The foundational work on securitization theory, popularized by Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde (1998), emphasizes the social construction of security through the concept of the "speech act." In this framework, securitizing actors initiate a "securitizing move" by framing certain issues as existential threats to a referent object. If the audience accepts this framing, it justifies the implementation of "extraordinary measures" that transcend normal political processes. Initially, this theory employed the speech act to define how an object is discursively constructed as an existential threat, thereby necessitating emergency responses beyond traditional rules (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 26).

However, Balzacq (2005) presents an enhanced version of securitization theory, arguing that the original "speech act" concept was limited by its focus on isolated social settings and its assumption that potential audiences were unaware of emerging security-related issues. Balzacq introduces the term "pragmatic act," which refines the notion of a speech act by explicitly incorporating previously overlooked factors such as the audience, the political agency of

the actor, and the external context. He asserts that for security statements to resonate with an audience, they must connect to external realities and be influenced by existing power dynamics. The effectiveness of a securitizing move, therefore, depends not merely on the utterance itself but on its embeddedness within a concrete arrangement of circumstances (Balzacq, 2005, pp. 178–182).

Components of the Pragmatic Act and Successful Securitization

Balzacq defines his version of the securitization process as a strategic or pragmatic practice, emphasizing that its success is contingent upon the interplay of three key sets of factors: the securitizing agent, the act itself (the securitizing move), and the audience within a specific context. The ability of the securitizing actor to resonate with the audience's existing feelings, needs, and interests is paramount. It's important to note that even a successfully completed securitization process doesn't guarantee that extraordinary measures will inevitably follow.

The pragmatic act itself consists of two intertwined components (Balzacq, 2005):

The Agent

This component is analyzed through three aspects: The power position and personal identity of the securitizing actor; The social identity of the securitizing actor; and the characteristics of the target audience, including main opponents or alternative perspectives on the issue.

The Act

This component consists of two elements: The use of appropriate language or rhetorical statements; Contextual events that are employed to persuade the audience (Balzacq, 2005, p. 179).

Table 1 below organizes these intertwined components of the pragmatic act, providing a structured overview for analysis.

Table 1. Elements of pragmatic act.

<i>Pragmatic Act</i>		
<i>No.</i>	<i>Agent</i>	<i>Act</i>
1.	Power position and identity of the securitizing actor	Rhetorical statements
2.	Social identity of the securitizing actor	Contextual event
3.	Characteristics of the target	

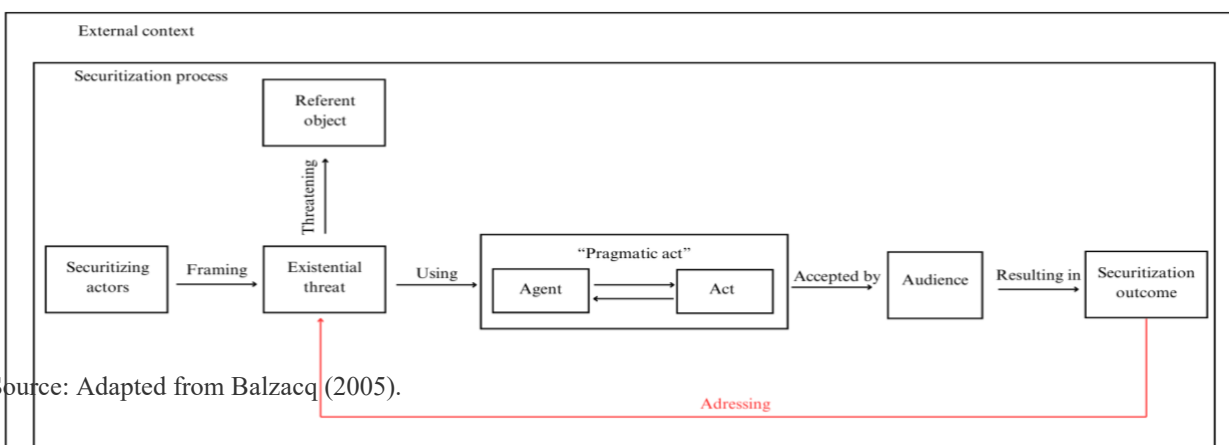
Source: Adapted from Balzacq (2005).

Applying Balzacq's Theory to Taiwan's Military Posture

This article leverages Balzacq's modifications to securitization theory to analyze Taipei's evolving military posture in response to the perceived threat from Beijing, especially given the historical and contemporary context surrounding this issue. The complex history and turbulent relations in the Taiwan Strait are well known and considered highly significant by the relevant audience, particularly Taipei's defense officials. Another important contextual factor is the escalating geopolitical tensions between Beijing and Washington, D.C., notably during the 2010s. Additionally, a series of incidents involving the People's Liberation Army (PLA) violating Taiwan's territorial sovereignty further highlight the relevance of external context in analyzing Taiwan's security policy. Finally, Tsai Ing-Wen's election as president is identified as a crucial catalyst that heightened the perception of China as an existential threat to Taiwan, thereby facilitating the securitizing move.

Figure 1 below visualizes how Balzacq's securitization theory will be operationalized in this paper to understand these dynamics.

Figure 1. A visualization of Balzacq's securitization theory



Source: Adapted from Balzacq (2005).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyze the shift in Taiwan's military posture, specifically focusing on the adoption of the Overall Defense Concept (ODC) in response to perceived threats from China. By examining key developments within a defined timeframe, this research aims to understand the circumstances that led to this strategic evolution.

This article primarily utilizes a qualitative analytical approach, drawing upon Balzacq's (2010) insights on the design and evolution of security issues. While not explicitly employing formal discourse analysis, the study meticulously examines the available narratives and representations within official documents and public statements to identify how China came to be

perceived as an existential threat. This

approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the securitization process by contextualizing attempts at securitizing actions by various actors within broader structures of meaning and power (Baker-Beall & Clark, 2021). The study also incorporates elements of process-tracing to outline the sequential developments and key junctures that contributed to Taiwan's defense policy changes.

This study relies on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data includes official government statements from Taiwan, particularly those related to defense policy, national security, and cross-strait relations. This encompasses speeches by President Tsai Ing-Wen and relevant Ministry of National Defense (MND) publications. Additionally, key reports from authoritative regional media

outlets are consulted to understand the public and political discourse surrounding China's perceived threat. Secondary sources comprise existing academic literature, think tank reports, and expert analyses on Taiwan's government, military, and security policy during the specified research period.

The data collection focuses on the period following Tsai Ing-Wen's election in 2016 up to her second inauguration address in 2020. This timeframe is selected because it directly encompasses the critical period during which President Tsai explicitly identified the ODC as a national security strategy and laid the groundwork for its implementation. The qualitative analytical approach involves systematic review and synthesis of these diverse sources to construct a coherent narrative of the evolving threat perception, the roles of various actors, and the subsequent policy adjustments that culminated in the adoption of the ODC.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Securitization Process in Taiwan After Tsai Ing-Wen's Election

An essential step in any securitization process is defining the existential threat identified by the securitizing actor. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), led by

Tsai Ing-Wen before the 2016 election, consistently highlighted the increasing capabilities of the Chinese military as a primary reason for advocating reform in Taiwan's security strategy. This concern was clearly reflected in their published defense "blue papers," notably those released by the DPP-affiliated think tank, the New Frontier Foundation (NFF), covering the DPP's national defense agenda from 2009 to 2015. While out of office, the DPP began to focus specifically on the growing challenge posed by the Chinese military, leading a group of former DPP defense ministers, national security council members, and military experts to author the first version of these documents in 2009, which included recommendations for military reforms (NFF, 2015).

In the latest version of these papers, published a year before the 2016 Taiwan elections, the DPP described an early rendition of the Overall Defense Concept (ODC) as one of its defense reform priorities upon its anticipated return to government. The document outlined the importance of developing asymmetric strategies, improving tactical integration across multiple military branches, and urgently enhancing information warfare capabilities. This

version also underscored the necessity for military officials to defer to civilian leadership in strategic military planning. Tsai Ing-Wen, as the leader of the DPP and president of the NFF, actively framed China as an existential threat throughout her presidential campaign, establishing this perception as a core tenet of her platform (Dreyer & deLisle, 2021, pp. 19–37).

The 2015 NFF paper further indicated how this framing of China as a significant threat would influence official security policy following the DPP's return to power. This influence was planned to be enacted through the General Staff Headquarters, led by the Chief of the General Staff, who would introduce policy recommendations derived from the "blue papers" to the military establishment (NFF, 2015). This strategic planning by the DPP, even before taking office, highlights a deliberate intent to shift Taiwan's defense posture in response to the perceived threat from Beijing.

Following this strategic roadmap, we proceed to analyze the subsequent steps in the securitization process, understood as the 'pragmatic act.' This act is defined as an arrangement of circumstances containing security statements that must relate to an external reality to be effective. Balzacq argued that the audience, context, and

securitizing agent are primary factors in assessing the effectiveness of a securitization process. These three interwoven elements will be further explained in the following subsections, demonstrating their interplay in Taiwan's defense transformation.

Geopolitical Background as External Context

Historically, the Chinese government has viewed Taiwan as a province that remains outside its control, a key foreign policy priority since China's Civil War in the 1940s. While Deng Xiaoping's era saw a toning down of aggressive rhetoric towards "reunification," and peaceful reunification became the primary strategy entering the 21st century, the use of force has never been ruled out by Chinese leaders.

As China's economy has rapidly grown, so too has its military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Despite some lingering gaps, the PLA has significantly narrowed its capabilities gap with the U.S. military, which has historically guaranteed Taiwan's security. The PLA now possesses the world's largest conventional cruise and ballistic missile arsenal, capable of targeting U.S. air and naval bases in East Asia and aircraft carriers at sea. Additionally, the PLA Navy has vastly improved its surface fleet,

enabling operations farther from China's coast and potentially pushing the U.S. Navy farther away from Taiwan in a conflict scenario (Gomez, 2023). These developments constitute a tangible external reality that directly informed Taiwan's shifting threat perception.

Since Tsai Ing-Wen's election, her refusal to recognize the 1992 Consensus has been a main source of contention for Beijing. While seemingly a shift from the status quo, this stance effectively countered the previous KMT strategy, which had used the Consensus to foster closer ties with China and mitigate Taiwan's international isolation (Cole, 2020, p. 22). In response to Tsai's position, China launched a relentless pressure campaign. This included suspending official communications, significantly reducing mainland visitors to Taiwan, luring away Taiwan's diplomatic allies, and pressuring international organizations to exclude Taiwan.

A particularly concerning development for Taiwan's military, and a crucial piece of process-tracing evidence, has been the increasing occurrences of airspace violations by the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF). These incursions, often circling the island, served as a clear means of

intimidation against Tsai's government and its citizens (Lee, 2023, p. 125). Duchâtel (2022) notes that Chinese military pressure intensified during Tsai's presidency, with PLAAF operations within Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) serving purposes beyond intimidation, including intelligence gathering and wearing down the Taiwanese air force. The increasing frequency of PLA exercises, involving increasingly advanced and well-armed platforms, was explicitly acknowledged by Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) as psychological warfare, showcasing China's growing force projection abilities (Cole, 2020, pp. 74–75). This escalation in direct military pressure served as a strong external reality that validated the growing perception of China as an immediate threat.

Huang (2022) further argues that the military balance has gradually shifted in favor of the PLA, a gap widened by General Secretary Xi Jinping's "deepening defense and military reform" since late 2015. This modernization eroded Taiwan's conventional military and technological advantages, making its capabilities numerically inferior to the PLA in personnel, weapon systems, and defense budgets. These concrete shifts in

military balance provided a compelling backdrop for securitizing actors to advocate for new defense strategies.

These developments in the geopolitical background correlate directly with the concept of the 'pragmatic act' as a crucial component of the 'act' framework. The tangible, escalating external reality of China's military modernization and assertive actions directly underpinned and lent credibility to the security statements and threat constructions made by Taiwanese securitizing actors, thereby influencing the audience's perception and receptiveness to new defense strategies.

Securitizing Moves by Domestic Securitizing Actors

We now examine the key actors involved in advocating for the securitization of China, particularly those with vested interests in portraying China as an existential threat to Taiwan.

The Government of Tsai Ing-Wen

Tsai Ing-Wen's election as president in 2016 was built on a public mandate to maintain Taiwan's sovereignty and democracy against China. She affirmed this by refusing to acquiesce to Beijing's preferences regarding the 1992 Consensus

and the "one China" concept (Cole, 2020, p. 34). As DPP leader, Tsai immediately began implementing her party's defense "blue papers," appointing Joseph Wu Jau-shieh, a DPP ally and cross-strait relations expert, as head of the National Security Council (Brown, 2017). Notably, Tsai even made concessions for foreign ministry appointments leaning towards the KMT, aiming for bipartisan support to implement her agenda within the traditionally conservative military establishment (Cole, 2020, p. 84).

A core defense platform in Tsai's campaign was the development of Taiwan's indigenous defense industry. Her implementation of an asymmetric military posture, exemplified by the ODC, aligned perfectly with this interest. The domestic production of numerous small, maneuverable, and affordable naval ships demonstrated a direct political intersection between her asymmetric strategy and the development of Taiwan's defense industrial base. Her symbolic visit to a shipyard in 2019, followed by the launch of the first fast mine-laying vessel in August 2020, actively promoted this initiative (Thompson, 2021, pp. 5–8). This move specifically garnered favor among nationalist factions within the

military establishment seeking reduced dependence on foreign military hardware.

President Tsai also made other significant efforts to persuade the military establishment to accept the new security paradigm. She initiated programs to improve military personnel welfare, including increased professional bonuses and pension reforms, aiming to consolidate civil-military relations (Dreyer & deLisle, 2021, p. 117). Additionally, her active pursuit of funding for both indigenous and American arms, requiring considerable diplomatic efforts with Washington, was viewed as essential and appreciated by the military.

Perhaps the most significant securitizing move by Tsai was her nomination of Admiral Lee Hsi-Min as Chief of the General Staff. Admiral Lee, a U.S.-educated naval officer, became President Tsai's "man on the inside." After the Two Defense Laws were passed in 2002, the Chief of General Staff's role was redefined to serve solely as the chief of staff for the defense minister, a landmark effort to unify previously bifurcated command structures. Lee played a crucial role in advocating for the ODC and articulating China as an existential threat within the military, navigating its traditionally resistant and insular culture

(Chu, 2024). Tsai publicly praised Lee's contributions, awarding him the highest military decoration upon his retirement (Teng, 2019), underscoring their close working relationship, as observed by local military analyst Huang (2024).

The United States as Taiwan's Longtime Ally

Even before Tsai's election, the DPP had a history of cooperation with the United States on security policy, inviting American defense experts to assist in drafting the 2013 version of the DPP's defense "blue papers" (NFF, 2015). This pre-existing collaboration laid the groundwork for a smoother security relationship during Tsai's presidency.

The United States also actively fostered collaboration, exemplified by a 2007 program for joint analysis of the PRC's military modernization. U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) experts worked alongside Taiwan's defense policymakers to develop potential military reforms. This close cooperation, rooted in decades of shared training and U.S. military aid, facilitated the securitization process within Taiwan, as the U.S. DOD broadly supported the ODC and an asymmetrical defense posture aimed at maximizing Taiwan's comparative advantages. Various U.S. officials publicly expressed confidence in the ODC as a

strategy to counter the Chinese threat (Thompson, 2021, pp. 2–10).

China's increasing assertiveness intensified this focus on the U.S. role, reflected in frequent interactions (3,500 to 4,000 Pentagon officials visiting Taiwan annually) and over \$15 billion in arms sales since 2010 (The Economist, 2019). Notably, the concept of an asymmetrical defense posture for Taiwan was first introduced and elaborated upon by U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense Wallace Gregson in 2009 (Wuthnow et al., 2022), demonstrating a long-standing U.S. influence that pre-dated and helped shape Taiwan's eventual embrace of the ODC.

Reception by the Securitization Audience

Following the analysis of the actors who framed the issue as a security threat and their strategies, we now assess the audience's reception of this securitization attempt. This assessment references the 'pragmatic act' by identifying the characteristics of the target audience, specifically the Ministry of National Defense (MND) and the National Security Council (NSC).

Ministry of National Defense

The Ministry of National Defense (MND), the bureaucratic body responsible

for the Taiwanese military, plays a crucial role in national security planning. Predominantly staffed by active and former military personnel with minimal civilian presence, this homogeneous composition has historically fostered resistance to reform. DPP members themselves have noted the ministry's reluctance, which has often forced lawmakers to act as external drivers for change (Wuthnow et al., 2022). Furthermore, the military's reputation suffered from corruption allegations in 2009 and a conscript's torture death in 2013 (Dreyer & deLisle, 2021, p. 115), complicating civil-military relations just prior to President Tsai's first term.

Local defense analysts have identified several major issues facing the MND's threat assessments and security policymaking capabilities. These include diminished intelligence capabilities due to PRC infiltration scandals, low morale among military personnel (especially concerning national identity), and a lack of modern defense expertise stemming from Taiwan's international isolation since the 1970s. This isolation led to limited formal exchanges with other militaries, leaving high-ranking officers less exposed to 21st-century methodologies and relying on outdated training (Liao, 2023). These internal

challenges within the MND posed significant hurdles for the successful securitization of China and the adoption of the ODC.

Despite these challenges, efforts by President Tsai and Admiral Lee successfully introduced new ideas into Taiwan's military posture. Tsai's administration fostered intensive discussions with military leadership, laying the groundwork for the ODC, moving beyond outdated concepts like those of General Hau Pei-tsun (Dreyer & deLisle, 2021, pp. 119–121). Admiral Lee noted in 2020 that key ODC concepts were developed through numerous meetings between the joint staff in the MND and U.S. military officials (Wuthnow et al., 2022, p. 311). While ODC development faced mixed success and resistance from senior officers (who found it challenging to justify acquiring expensive conventional hardware), mid-level staff officers generally supported the ODC, recognizing its value in an asymmetric strategy against the PLA. However, implementation progress remained slow due to junior officers' limited incentive to challenge superiors (Thompson, 2021, p. 8). Huang (2022) argued that the unexpected omission of the term ODC in the 2021 Quadrennial Defense Review reflected an inherited Chinese bureaucratic culture that

discourages adopting predecessors' signature policies, though it did not signify a decline in institutional support for the ODC's principles.

National Security Council

The National Security Council (NSC) serves as an advisory body to the president, comprising members from intelligence and cabinet sectors. York W. Chen, Deputy Secretary-General of the NSC, acknowledged that parts of Taiwan's military establishment recognized China's rapidly increasing military threat as a crucial issue for future defense development even before President Tsai's term (Dreyer & deLisle, 2021). Sheu Jyh-shyang, a fellow at the military-affiliated Institute for National Defense and Security Research, notes that some NSC members are open to asymmetric warfare concepts, including the ODC (Rickards, 2024). However, other NSC members continued to justify conventional and costly arms purchases, partly due to the psychological advantages of high-tech, American-made platforms on public morale, which conflicted with ODC principles (Hunzeker et al., 2018). This demonstrates the internal dynamics and varied receptiveness within a key audience.

The Adoption of Overall Defense Concept (ODC) After the Securitization Process

The ODC has emerged as the primary framework guiding Taiwan's military force-building and operational strategies after a process of securitization. According to Huang (2022), the perception of China as an existential threat and primary adversary has been widely embraced by Taiwan's military establishment. The annual Han Kuang military exercises in 2019, portrayed by the Ministry of National Defense (MND) spokesperson as a demonstration of the ODC focusing on littoral combat and beach defense, indicate that the ODC has progressed beyond conceptualization and is actively shaping training and doctrinal development (Thompson, 2021, p. 7). In press conferences, MND officials expressed the necessity for "range, precision, and mobility" in military strategies, aligning with the ODC's requirements for small, widely distributed, operationally resilient, agile, and well-led units aimed at denying the PLA effective sea control.

Dotson (2022) identifies a trend toward a new asymmetric focus within Taiwan's military, based on recent senior official statements and budgetary allocations, emphasizing indigenous production and a

shift toward lighter, more mobile, and more numerous vessels. Additional indicators of China emerging as an existential threat, consistent with President Tsai's policies and cooperation with the MND, include extending compulsory military service from four months to one year, prioritizing asymmetric arms purchases (like missiles and mines), investing in Taiwan's defense industrial base, and overhauling Taiwan's reserve forces (Sacks, 2023). These observations collectively align with Balzacq's characterization of securitization as a strategic or pragmatic practice occurring within a specific context, encompassing contextual elements, the audience's shared understanding, and the relative power dynamics between the speaker and listener.

CONCLUSION

This article has thoroughly examined the key factors underpinning the securitization of China as an existential threat and the subsequent development of the Overall Defense Concept (ODC) within Taiwan's military establishment. Through a qualitative analytical approach and an exploration of the process-tracing of events, we have analyzed the crucial interplay between the external geopolitical context, the actions of securitizing actors, and the

reception by the target audiences, culminating in the adoption of ODC.

Our analysis demonstrates that President Tsai Ing-Wen played a central and instrumental role in this securitization process. By strategically leveraging the deteriorating cross-strait relations and the escalating military assertiveness from Beijing—a tangible external reality—she successfully introduced and championed new ideas into national security policy. With the steadfast support of Admiral Lee Hsi-Min, who navigated the traditionally resistant Ministry of National Defense (MND) bureaucracy, and the crucial backing of the United States, Tsai facilitated the implementation of the ODC. This shift was not merely a policy change but a fundamental reorientation of Taiwan's defense posture, driven by a redefined understanding of its primary security threat.

The Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) continued electoral success, as evidenced by their victory in the 2024 elections, is likely to solidify President Tsai's legacy in defense policy. This suggests an institutionalization of the ODC's principles. However, concerns raised by Admiral Lee regarding the lack of concrete commitments on asymmetric defense strategies from the

recent candidates indicate that certain elements of the ODC may still face political challenges or public reluctance. Despite this, the DPP's ongoing dedication to reforming Taiwan's security policy, coupled with the ODC's inherent flexibility and potential for adaptation (as implied by its original Chinese meaning, *zheng ti*, or "overall"), suggests continued optimism for its long-term implementation.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how securitization processes unfold in complex geopolitical environments, particularly when driven by a combination of political leadership, military innovation, and external pressure. It highlights the critical role of key individuals and the broader strategic context in shaping national security perceptions and responses. Future research could further explore the long-term impacts of ODC implementation, analyze public perception shifts across different demographics in Taiwan, or compare Taiwan's securitization process with other small island states facing similar great power challenges.

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