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## China's military has an Achilles' heel: Low troop morale

'One-child army' more inclined to add unmanned aircraft and ballistic missiles

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TOKYO -- The Chinese Communist Party has unintentionally revealed weaknesses of the country's military.

One indication came with the building of facilities for launching new intercontinental ballistic missiles in an inland desert region. The other was a series of further attempts to increase childbirths, including measures to help reduce the costly burden of educating children. Behind these moves lurks evidence that the country is addressing concerns regarding troop morale and the military's ability to fight a sustained war.

For nearly a decade, China has been busy in the South China Sea, first building artificial islands, then deploying radar equipment and missiles to deter foreign military aircraft and vessels from approaching the area, and finally deploying strategic nuclear submarines capable of launching ballistic missiles in the now-protected sea.

Submarine-launched ballistic missiles, known as SLBMs, are the ultimate weapon. They allow nations to avoid being put in disadvantageous positions since the subs that carry them can remain in deep waters, keeping the enemy at bay, until the very end.

So why is China rushing to build new ICBM bases in inland desert areas? Experts believe the reason lies in the fact that although China has militarized some waters in the South China Sea and deployed SLBMs, it no longer has confidence it can defend the area should conflict arise.

In January 2018, a Chinese submarine humiliatingly revealed its lack of high-level performance. The submarine, traveling undersea in a contiguous zone of Japan's Senkaku Islands, in the East China Sea, was quickly detected by the Japanese Self-Defense Forces.

It was quick to surface and unhesitatingly raise the Chinese flag, which might as well have been a white flag of surrender; the crew presumably feared their vessel could be attacked with depth charges.

Under international law, the Maritime Self-Defense Force could have regarded the vessel as an "unidentified submarine" that had intruded into Japanese territorial waters while submerged.

Many Japanese and U.S. officials believe the incident symbolizes the low morale of Chinese troops.

Chinese Communist Party governments have spent the past quarter-century increasing military spending and staging military parades and naval reviews. But visible might like missiles and tanks is only one component of military power. There are also invisible inputs, like troop morale.

The Chinese navy has been working on an aircraft carrier program, but a former Japanese Ministry of Defense official predicts Chinese aircraft carriers will not leave their military ports in conflicts out of fear they might be attacked and sunk.

Some believe that Chinese soldiers' low morale is attributable to the country's long-standing one-child policy, which has made the military one of the world's leading "one-child armies."

"Over 70% of Chinese soldiers are 'only children,' and the rest are the second or later children whose parents had to pay fines to bear them," said Kinichi Nishimura, a former Ground Self-Defense Force officer who for many years has analyzed East Asia's military balance at the Ministry of Defense's Defense Intelligence Headquarters and elsewhere.

The Confucianist view that children must respect and take good care of their parents and ancestors remains deep-rooted in China. As a result, parents are particularly reluctant to see their children die earlier than they do. Parents of one-child households must feel even more strongly about their only son or daughter becoming nothing more than a proverbial "nail."

In China, where people tend to have little respect for soldiers, there is a saying: "Good steel does not become nails," meaning respectable individuals do not become soldiers. In order to ensure it can secure sufficient numbers of troops, the party has been working to improve salaries and pensions.

On Aug. 1, the government enacted a law to protect the status, rights and interests of military personnel. This desperate effort to improve the patina of a military career might be a sign that the People's Liberation Army has not been able to turn around its recruitment efforts, especially in the face of the country's ebbing fertility rate.

"The Chinese military has increased the deployment of battleships and fighter planes since a few years ago," Nishimura said, "but their operating rates are not exactly high. It seems they are unable to sufficiently train enough soldiers to properly maintain and repair" the high-tech hardware.

This is partly why the Chinese military in recent years has come to rely more on unmanned aircraft and ballistic missiles. The number of ballistic missiles China deploys has increased to several thousand.

One of the PLA's military doctrines not widely known, says, "In the initial battle of war, launch a large number of missiles and then immediately leave the front line." This strategy was picked up from the former Soviet Union, whose military played the role of teacher while China was forming the PLA.

Over the past few years, the PLA has rushed to add more fighter jets, surface ships and submarines, which might indicate an intention to increase the number of missiles that can be launched when battles commence. Unmanned aircraft are thought to have the same purpose. This strategy will continue, especially when the military is not able to secure enough soldiers.

To protect themselves from Chinese missile attacks, Japan and other nations must start thinking about enhancing measures to mitigate damage. These measures include developing and deploying next-generation arms, including high-energy laser weapons and rail guns, which use electromagnetic force to launch projectiles at extremely high speeds. Japan already has a technological foundation to develop these weapons, though this capacity is not widely known in the country.

