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Institutional Decay in US: Can the 7th Fleet Still Fight?

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

Scandal, deficient seamanship training, deferred maintenance and readiness investments, and cronyised acquisition decisions have harmed morale and rendered the US Navy's combat capability a questionable strategic asset.

COMMENTARY

INSTITUTIONAL DECAY is widespread in the United States, with evidence visible within governmental domains as well as without. Within government and looking only at the Executive Branch, critical attention has been drawn to everything from the FBI to the civil service, the post office, the Veterans Administration, the Internal Revenue Service and more.

Not surprisingly, COVID-19 has harmed the functioning of large organisations in the US, as in other countries, exacerbating what was already problematic. Whatever is beneath the widespread decay now affects the combat-arms wings of the US military, and perhaps the most troubling case involves the US Navy – not to exclude the 7th Fleet, the most powerful in history, floating off the coast not far from Singapore.

Perfect Storm Warnings

Recent weeks have featured multiple media headlines about the Navy's apparently outsized morale problems with both white supremacist extremism in its lower ranks and systemic racism at its upper echelons. But these headlines are just the latest in what is by now a long series of bad-news tidings.

Major scandals, revealing massive moral turpitude among Navy brass, heads off those bad-news tidings. Not very long after the infamous September 1991 Tailhook affair,

the long-running “Fat Leonard” episode has yet to fully play out. Beginning in 2006, Leonard Glenn Francis, a Malaysian national and head of the ship support group Glenn Defence Marine Asia (GDMA), spent hundreds of thousands of dollars extending favours.

He provided travel expenses, luxury items, and prostitutes to a large number of 7th Fleet officers in return for proprietary contracting information, intelligence about investigations into GDMA business dealings, and even classified information about US ship movements in Southeast and East Asia. Indictments were finally handed down in 2013, but the investigation still continues: Some 60 admirals have been implicated so far as well as a vast host of lesser officers.

There have been collisions from poor seamanship. On 17 June 2017, the *USS Fitzgerald*, a US\$1.8 billion destroyer, smashed into a giant cargo ship, the Philippine-flagged container vessel *ACX Crystal*, off the coast of Japan. Seven sailors drowned. About two months later, on 21 August, the *USS John S. McCain* turned directly in front of a 30,000-ton oil tanker in the Strait of Malacca just off Singapore. Ten more sailors assigned to the 7th Fleet died.

Parochial Iron Triangle Interests

Official and private investigations revealed massive deceit and irresponsible buck-passing among dozens of senior civilian as well as military officials over a period of years. Repeated efforts to call attention to readiness, maintenance, training, and skills deficits, not least by Vice Adm. Joseph Aucoin when he took command of the 7th Fleet in 2015, were ignored or suppressed by more senior officials in pursuit of acquisition funding in budget competition with the other services.

At the same time, the Navy’s acquisition strategy has been shaped more by parochial Iron Triangle interests, defined by a distortive nexus of congressional desiderata, defence industry priorities and post-retirement revolving-door sinecure-seeking, than by sound maritime strategy. Recent war games involving the 7th Fleet suggest a significant mismatch between what the Navy has and what it needs in maritime fights with the PLA Navy in the Indo-Pacific.

The possible inability of the 7th Fleet to prevail in maritime combat contingencies, or even to keep sea-lanes of communication (SLOCs) to regional allies open in a military crisis, erodes deterrence and diminishes the balm of regional strategic reassurance that the 7th Fleet is all about. It also suggests pressure to quickly ride up the escalation ladder in a crisis to involve land-based assets — a dangerous temptation indeed among nuclear-armed competitors.

This past March had witnessed the embarrassing public fracas concerning the handling of a COVID-19 outbreak on the *USS Theodore Roosevelt*, apparently contracted in Vietnam. The captain (Brett Crozier), the Secretary of the Navy (Thomas Modley), and the Secretary of Defence (Mark Esper) all acted badly in public, as did above them all the Commander-in-Chief.

Among veteran Navy personnel the *TR* incident came almost as a relief, since it featured just bad manners and worse management: no scandal, no bloodshed, no

treasonous compromise of classified information. But that just indicated how routinised the dire the situation has become.

The Mason Episode

All this and more has profoundly affected moral up and down the command structure, particularly with regard to the Navy's surface fleet (less so with submariners and naval air operations). The problems seemed to coalesce after the October 2016 attacks on the *USS Mason* (DDG-87) while operating in the Red Sea north of the Bab el-Mandeb, off the coast of Yemen.

Houthi rebels fired Chinese-made shore-to-ship cruise missiles at the *Mason* on three separate occasions within a week. None of the missiles hit the ship and no one was harmed, but many of the crew were deeply shocked, and the shock reverberated to other crews, as well.

A main reason is that all US Navy combat operations in recent years have involved either carrier-based aircraft flying distances to deliver their ordnance or sea-launched cruise missile attacks against land targets.

The close-quarters attacks on the *Mason* were the first hint of actual combat that current navy crews had ever experienced, and their training — which has almost exclusively involved computer-game like simulations — bore little resemblance to the live-fire training critical for developing readiness in actual combat contingencies.

Many crews throughout the surface Navy are now afraid to put to sea for lack of realistic combat training. One of them on active duty on the *Mason* described how certain combat systems aboard the *Mason* that might have come in handy for defending against a cruise missile attack were either of limited capability or altogether inoperable at the time due to deferred maintenance and training deficiencies.

That a member of a combat-arms service would publicly express such sentiments in front of peers and superior officers illustrates how stoicism in the face of hardship had lately become a wasting asset in the Navy. It is hard to resist the conclusion that the surface fleet Navy is in no mental condition to actually fight effectively.

Primus Inter Pares No More?

On 25 February 2021, in a welcome gesture of gratitude, Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin flew out to greet the *USS Nimitz* off the coast of San Diego on its return from a 321-day deployment. The length of deployment on this occasion owed something to concern for protecting the crew from COVID: safer at sea than in port. But the long duration of deployments has become too common--and costly.

Sailors cannot be trained up to spec when they are at sea so long. and wearing the Navy's men and machines to bones and thin brass for lack of rational prioritization — is unwise for the combat-arms service that is *primus inter pares* in the enduring US strategic posture of forward-deploying common security goods.

Perhaps that's one reason no nomination has yet been forthcoming from the Biden

administration for the next civilian Secretary of the Navy. The vetting of candidates continues, but could it be that there aren't many takers for a job that promises only headaches and heartburn?

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