While East Asia has stood out in recent history for its exceptional 70-year period of peace, it would be wrong to assume that policymakers in the region aren’t worried about, or aren’t gearing up for, future conflict.

Numerous potential flash points exist, from the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, the East and South China Seas, and South Asia. Those worries are fueling Asia’s push to modernize their military forces, thus risking an arms race.
The Troubled US Seventh Fleet
By Sam Bateman

A startling number of accidents befell the Pacific-based US Seventh Fleet in 2017. The incidents ranged from running aground to collisions and other incidents that cost lives. But these are not isolated occurrences, and they speak to a troubling pattern within the US Navy itself, argues Sam Bateman. While the US retains naval hardware superiority on the seas, the Navy must look deep into itself for the causes of recent miscues before it is too late.

The US Seventh Fleet has had its share of incidents in recent years, both deadly accidents and corruption-related troubles. Then in 2017, there were five major accidents involving its surface ships. Another two serious accidents involved aircraft and loss of life. On Jan. 31, 2017, the USS Antietam, a guided-missile cruiser, suffered severe underwater damage after running aground while anchoring in Tokyo Bay. On May 9, another guided-missile cruiser, the USS Lake Champlain, collided with a South Korean fishing boat near the Korean Peninsula. On June 17, a collision between the USS Fitzgerald, a guided-missile destroyer, and a merchant ship off the coast of Honshu, Japan, claimed the lives of seven American sailors and resulted in serious damage to the Fitzgerald. On Aug. 21, the USS John S McCain, another guided-missile destroyer, collided with an oil tanker in the crowded shipping lanes off Singapore, leaving 10 American sailors dead, five more injured, and the ship heavily damaged. In a less-serious accident on Nov. 18, the destroyer USS Benfold was hit by a Japanese tug off the coast of Japan.

The troubles of the Seventh Fleet are not limited to operational accidents. The fleet was the subject in recent years of the worst corruption scandal ever faced by the US Navy. This is the so-called Fat Leonard Affair: an ongoing investigation into the ship-support contractor Glenn Defense Marine Asia (GDMA), a firm run by Leonard Glenn Francis, a Malaysian national known as “Fat Leonard.”

Francis is alleged to have provided hundreds of dollars in cash, travel expenses, luxury items and prostitutes to a large number of uniformed officers of the Seventh Fleet. In return, they provided him with classified material about the movements of ships and submarines, confidential contracting information and information about active law-enforcement investigations. The Washington Post called the scandal “perhaps the worst national-security breach of its kind to hit the Navy since the end of the Cold War.”

More than 30 people have now been criminally charged in connection with the scandal. Francis remains in an American jail awaiting trial, while one admiral, several captains and commanders, and some more junior officers from the Seventh Fleet, already have been sentenced to prison terms. Additionally, six admirals have been disciplined or admirably by the Navy.

Not the First Time
These incidents are all the more troubling because the Seventh Fleet is one of the major geographically based commands of the US Navy. Based in Yokosuka, Japan, with some units elsewhere in Japan and South Korea, it is the largest of the forward-deployed US fleets and has a huge geographical area of responsibility stretching from the Indian sub-continent to the mid-Pacific. Along with the Third Fleet, which is responsible for the Eastern half of the Pacific, it is part of the US Pacific Fleet under the US Pacific Command.

While other major US military commands are largely oriented to the Army and/or Air Force, the Pacific Command is very naval in nature. The Seventh Fleet comprises roughly 60 to 70 ships, 300 aircraft and 40,000 Navy and Marine Corps personnel. Its principal responsibilities are to provide joint command in military operations and operational command of all naval forces in the Indo-Pacific region, in particular in defense of the Korean Peninsula or in response to assertive actions by China.

A recent book by American journalist Michael Fabey (Crashback, Scribner, 2017) points a worrying picture of the Seventh Fleet. He hangs much of his story on an incident in December 2013 when the guided-missile cruiser USS Cowpens was monitoring the operations of the Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning in the South China Sea, but was forced to back off by the harassment actions of vessels escorting the carrier.

Fabey sees this as an example of American weakness, but in doing so, he describes a deplorable situation on the USS Cowpens. In his words, the captain had “a troubled ship, with a struggling crew — sailing alone into dangerous waters, with uncertain orders, for a rendezvous with a proud and unpredictable adversary.” But he is also often sick in his cabin, leaving “an inexperienced officer on the bridge giving orders to other inexperienced officers.”

The captain had earlier sacked the ship’s Executive Officer (XO) and appointed instead the chief engineering officer, a 33-year-old female lieutenant-commander, as the temporary XO. However, she had only been in the Navy for 11 years, and that period included a lengthy exchange posting in the Royal Australian Navy at a tactical training school. Then it was later revealed that the captain and his acting XO were in what appeared to be a romantic relationship.

It was an amazing failure of command that this situation was allowed to develop without some remedial action being taken.

The US Navy has had no shortage of serious groundings and collisions in recent years. In February 2013, the guided-missile cruiser USS Port Royal ran aground on a reef off Oahu, causing serious damage to both the ship and the reef. In August 2012, the guided-missile destroyer USS Porter was severely damaged after a collision with a large tanker in the Straits of Hormuz. In January 2013, the mine-countermeasures vessel USS Guardian was wrecked in the Philippines. In February 2014, the frigate USS Taylor ran aground while entering port in Turkey.

Sloppy navigation and seamanship were a feature of all these accidents, which suggests that all is not well with these skills in the US Navy.

Deeper Troubles
The dismal record of Seventh Fleet accidents in 2017 has led to much activity to redress the situation. The Commander of the Seventh Fleet was made a scapegoat and sacked, a move that led to other senior officers in the chain of command being removed from their positions due to a loss of confidence in their ability to command. In addition, the captains of the McCain and Fitzgerald are now facing criminal manslaughter charges.

The comprehensive review of the McCain and Fitzgerald incidents made the case that as additional burdens were placed on the Seventh Fleet, its busiest ships started laboring under a culture of accepting greater risk and cutbacks to keep ships under way that might not have been ready. A leading cause of the accidents was claimed to lie in overworked ships and overworked crews. Thus, part of the solution was seen to be a budgetary one — give us more ships and more personnel. This, however, obscures deeper cultural issues.

There must be a nagging thought that the troubles of the Seventh Fleet may not be unique but are symptomatic of problems throughout the US Navy. They have only come to light recently because the Seventh Fleet operates under a higher level of operational pressure, including in areas of congested shipping traffic.

The Navy has three main operational schools — submariners, aviators and surface warfare officers. Submariners drive submarines, aviators fly aircraft (and in the case of the naval aviators who fly fixed-wing patrol and surveillance aircraft from bases ashore, some might have little, if any, experience at sea), and surface warfare officers operate ships. To some extent, surface warfare officers are the poor cousins of the aviation and submarine elites. Senior command positions in the US Navy tend to be held by aviators and submariners. The
current Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) along with his predecessor are submariners. The current Vice Chief of Naval Operations and the retiring Commander of US Forces in the Pacific are both aviators — of the fixed-wing, shore-based type. The current Commander of the Pacific Fleet and his nominated successor are both aviators, and the present Commander of the Seventh Fleet and his predecessor are both submariners.

To add to the potential cultural problem, American naval aviators are not expected to have bridge experience in the same way their opposite numbers in the British Royal Navy and Royal Australian Navy are expected to have. While senior American naval commanders are undoubtedly highly experienced in an operational and strategic sense and may have senior surface warfare officers on their staffs, there may be some cultural limitations in driving through necessary reforms after major surface ship accidents.

The US Navy might reconsider its “unrestricted line officer” concept whereby its surface warfare officers are expected to gain experience as platform and combat system engineers at the expense of seamanship and navigation. A recent article in the US Naval Institute Proceedings showed that a surface warfare officer might be in command of a destroyer or frigate after about 18 years of service, about half of which may have been at sea. And those sea postings may well have been in the engineering and combat systems departments. This might be sufficient to prepare an officer to fight a ship, but it’s open to question whether it’s sufficient time to produce a competent and experienced ship driver.

Then there’s the issue of bridge resource management. US destroyers and cruisers can have a “football team” of people on the bridge. Leaving aside the commanding officer who may or may not be on the bridge, these will include the officer of the deck, responsible to the captain for safe navigation; a conning officer ordering changes of course and speed; a junior officer of the deck monitoring radar and communications; a helmsman; quartermasters who plot the ship’s course; communications sailors manning radio links with other ships; and lookouts. Then several decks below, the Combat Information Center (CIC) consists of a separate team of officers and sailors tasked with monitoring radar and other information about vessels in the ship’s vicinity and relaying recommendations to the bridge.

This number of people on the bridge is rather more than might be found on the bridge of an equivalent size warship in another navy. Another big difference with the US Navy is that non-commissioned quartermasters undertake the hands-on navigation of a ship, fixing its position by a variety of means, and making course adjustments.

It’s essential that this team be managed efficiently with a minimum of fuss and noise. However, this may not be the case. A pilot who navigated an American guided-missile cruiser through the navigationally intricate waters of the Torres Strait between Australia and New Guinea described the situation on the ship’s bridge to me as “organized chaos.” A recording of conversations on the bridge of the USS Porter prior to the collision in 2012 certainly showed a situation of chaos, which undoubtedly contributed to the incident. It should have sent alarm bells ringing throughout the Navy, but unfortunately no follow-up action appears to have been taken, begging the question of whether this inaction could have contributed to the Fitzgerald and McCain collisions.

American naval commentators frequently allude to the importance of compliance with the Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (ColRegs) to ensure navigational safety. This is certainly important, but it would be better to avoid a “holier than thou” implication that the US Navy sticks to the rules and others don’t.

Other Factors at Work

While the above points all help explain why US warships are having accidents, there is another important factor that contributed to the collisions involving the Fitzgerald and McCain, as well as the Porter — no ship was showing Automatic Identification System (AIS) data at the time of its accident. This was in order to keep their identity as American warships secret. Not showing AIS in areas of heavy shipping traffic, such as Tokyo Bay or the Singapore Strait, was unsafe and un-seamanlike navigational practice. Fortunately, the Navy has now ordered its ships to show AIS in such areas.

The Fitzgerald, McCain and Porter collisions all occurred at night, and all three ships were proceeding at a speed that was excessive for the circumstances. Several common factors showed up in the investigations into these collisions: a lack of understanding and adherence to ColRegs, including the need to proceed at a safe speed; poor interactions between the commanding officer and key personnel on the bridge; a lack of knowledge of key bridge systems; and a failure of CICs to provide adequate support to the bridge.

All three collisions involved warships crashing around in busy shipping lanes at excessive speed without enough regard for other users of the sea. The sovereign immunity of warships should not exclude warships from following common-sense navigational safety rules, particularly in congested shipping areas. Unfortunately, this suggests an attitude of superiority and exceptionalism — “we are American warships and we don’t have to follow the rules!” This culture might also breed a failure to learn from the accidents, fueling the persistent worry that the US Navy has been slow to learn from its mistakes.

Rethink the Culture

These three collisions also suggest a more contentious cultural issue: the possibility that a feeling of superiority might pervade the US Navy. This is apparent in the catchcry that we are “the biggest and the best.” The US Navy is certainly the biggest, and the best when it comes to naval warfare hardware, although that position is now being contested in some dimensions by the Chinese. Rather, the faults appear to lie on the personnel side — in the areas of training, organization, management and culture.

The surface warships of the Seventh Fleet are the most visible elements of American military power in the Indo-Pacific region. The credibility of that power depends on these vessels being seen to operate both safely and efficiently. The recent accidents have damaged the required image. Rather than just looking for solutions in terms of additional resources, more ships, more crews and improved working hours, there are deeper cultural and personnel issues to be addressed, even though this may mean turning over many years of tradition. America’s friends and allies in the Indo-Pacific region look to the US Navy, and the Seventh Fleet in particular, to put their organizations in order.

Sam Bateman had four lengthy sea commands in the Royal Australian Navy, including on a frigate and a guided-missile destroyer. He is now a Professorial Research Fellow at the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS), University of Wollongong, Australia.