

**PACIFIC PERSPECTIVES:
IS THE U.S. MILITARY READY IN ASIA?
GETTING THAT SINKING FEELING?**

BY TOM PLATE- With North Korea's military trying its hardest to get everyone's attention with the hard power of the nuclear option, it's not the time to tear down the U.S. military. But it is - alas - so easy to imagine that in some officers' club, perhaps at Yulin naval headquarters on Hainan Island, where China's brass gather and after a few belts of Baijiu recycle submarine stories - it's easy to imagine them laughing their heads off. Why? The embarrassing recent stumbles by the US Navy's Seventh Fleet just have to be the toast of the PLA Navy.

The object of their presumed hoopla - four astonishing U.S. Navy mess-ups in the Pacific that left sailors dead and/or missing - is obviously anything but a joking matter to America's military establishment. It is extremely painful.

Earlier last month, off Singapore, the destroyer USS John S. McCain and an oil tanker slammed into each other, injuring sailors and leaving others missing. In June, off Japan, seven sailors perished and many others were injured when the destroyer USS Fitzgerald creamed a container ship. There were other blunders at sea. In May, the USS Lake Champlain rammed into a South Korean fishing boat. In January, the USS Antietam guided missile cruiser ran aground near Yokosuka, home port of the Seventh Fleet.

The Pentagon sacked the admiral in charge of the Pacific armada, which oversees roughly 52 percent of the Earth's surface, from the waters of the U.S. west coast to the west coast of India. A red-faced Navy fleet command officially explained that the three-star admiral had been relieved "due to a loss of confidence in his ability to command." That might seem to use dry-docked civilians as a bit of an understatement. Joking aside, Pacific waters are now so very dangerous. China and the U.S. circle like sharks around each other constantly, and yet here we have American boats evidently bobbing all over the Pacific more like drunken sailors. This might well prove colossal misjudgment (and if it turns out I am overstating the case, I apologize in advance and accept being confined to quarters): But to me this steady stream of sorry blunders is the most unnerving story of serious U.S. naval napping since Pearl Harbor. Consider that over the decades the U.S. Pacific Command has been the premier perch for some of America's most distinguished military leaders, such naval icons as Arthur W. Radford; Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Jr.; John S. McCain Jr.; and William J. Crowe, Jr., to mention just a few.

Nonetheless, in the American media, these embarrassments about our otherwise revered Navy and the evident lack of attention to detail of some otherwise admired officers and crew more or less slipped under the radar of much of our American media. With the TV media especially locked and loaded at another target, the sinking sagas in the Pacific seas were viewed as an egregious annoyance and unworthy interruption of the (endless and repetitive) Donald J. Trump attack. Now the media focus is almost solely on North Korea and its nuclear and missile tests.

There is much talent in the American Navy. In more recent times, I came to admire Admirals Joseph W. Prueher, who was to become ambassador to China in the late Clinton administration years; Dennis C. Blair, who was to become National Security Adviser under the Obama

administration; and Thomas B. Fargo, a droll Clint Eastwood-style submarine commander who was to become the role model for the character of "Commander Bart Mancuso" in the hit film *The Hunt for Red October*.

These officers and gentlemen had smarts and charisma - no enemy would under-estimate them. They were also sensible souls: Well trained at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland - and, in Blair's case, at Oxford as well - they were exposed to an excellent social-science faculty as well as the standard combat canon, in an effort to turn out professional warriors, not thoughtless warmongers. So here's a cautionary thought for the admirals of Yulin: Hold off on breaking open the champagne and for the time being stay steady-as-you-go in the South China Sea.

You could also joke with them that, given recent evidence, if you get hit by an American warship, don't assume it was purposeful! On the other hand, maybe we're over-rating the sense of humor of China's naval command. Surely the PLA Navy has experienced its own share of embarrassing moments it has not permitted China's news media to share with the world. It may even have some sympathy for the U.S. Navy - professionally speaking, not politically of course. They swim in the same roiling waters, and have been well briefed on our current U.S. president's adoration of naval power. Mr Trump is, after all, of the generation that had it all glorified in a memorable documentary series about the U.S. struggle against Japan whose title was *Victory at Sea*. They may be thinking: there's nothing very funny about that.

There's also nothing funny about our President's hardline toward North Korea. But how smart is it? The President should dispatch (and North Korea should welcome) Secretary of Defense James Mattis, who, as far as I can tell, everyone who has dealt with him respects, to Pyongyang for a down-to-issues talk with President Kim Yong Un and his generals. It is hard to see how this could add to the current high level of tension. My suggestion is certainly not intended as a joke.

Columnist and Loyola Marymount University Prof Tom Plate's new book is 'Yo-Yo Diplomacy: An American Columnist Tackles the Ups and Downs Between China and the U.S.' An earlier version of this column appeared in the South China Morning Post, which is the home paper for Plate's columns on China-U.S. relations.