



## **The *JS Sōryū* Collision: A News Digest**

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**February 2021**

### **Executive Summary**

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On February 8, 2021, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) submarine *JS Sōryū* (SS-501) collided with a bulk carrier off the coast of Japan during a routine exercise. Three crew members aboard the submarine sustained minor injuries; periscope, starboard diving plane and communication equipment of the submarine were damaged. No damage was initially reported by the commercial vessel but later inspections revealed damage below the water line.

The incident is only one of several collisions between JMSDF and civilian units during recent years. Since there are strict procedures and protocols governing every aspect of operating submarines, the question arises what this incident was caused by. If the human factor is involved, it must be asked in how far a reform of doctrine, error management culture and protocols can help to avoid future accidents of this kind.

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## Analysis

### The accident

On the evening of Monday, February 8, 2021, the Ministry of Defense of Japan announced<sup>1</sup> that a Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force submarine, the *JS Sōryū*, had collided with a civilian bulk carrier during a routine training mission following a scheduled inspection approx. 40 km (22 nm) off Cape Ashizuri, Kōchi Prefecture, at 10:58 a. m. local time that very day. Upon receiving the news, PM Suga ordered a complete assessment of the situation, a confirmation of the safety of the civilian ship and a timely disclosure of information to the general public.

Three crew members of the *Sōryū* sustained minor injuries which did not require emergency evacuation. The *Sōryū* suffered substantial damage to her sail, periscope and antenna mast. In addition, the starboard side diving plane was torn and broken, hanging by an angle of approx. 45 degrees<sup>2</sup> (see figure 1). The submarine could no longer communicate and dive; in order to establish communication with its base, the boat had to sail within reach of the nearest land-based cell phone tower in order to establish contact via mobile phone.

When initially contacted by the Japan Coast Guard, the bulk carrier had reported being neither aware of a collision nor of any damage to this effect. In fact, the vessel suffered damage near the bow, 8 to 13 m below the water line, with cracked dents through which sea water bled into the vessel.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1: The damaged starboard side diving plane of the *Sōryū*. Image source: <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20210209/k10012857021000.html> (accessed February 10, 2021)

1 Bōei daijin rinji kisha kaiken [Minister of Defense, extraordinary press conference] February 08, 2021. [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/press/kisha/2021/0208a\\_r.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/press/kisha/2021/0208a_r.html) (accessed February 9, 2021).

2 See pictures at: “Sensuikan jiko shōsen kakunin mo yokirezu shōtotsu anzen kakunin no hōhō nado chōsa” [Submarine collision: commercial ship identified, yet collision unavoidable, investigation into safety procedures etc. pending] February 09, 2021. [https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20210209/k10012856681000.html?utm\\_int=nsearch\\_contents\\_search-items\\_010](https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20210209/k10012856681000.html?utm_int=nsearch_contents_search-items_010) (accessed February 10, 2021).

3 Sensuikan shōtotsu jiko kamotsusen no senshu fukin ni sonshō wo kakunin [Submarine collision accident: Confirmed damage near the bow of cargo ship] February 10, 2021. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20210210/k10012860491000.html> (accessed February 10, 2021).



The following day, JMSDF Chief of Staff Adm. Yamamura offered apologies to the Japanese public, emphasizing that the cause of the accident must be investigated thoroughly and measures to prevent similar events in the future should be conceived.<sup>4</sup>

### **Ships involved in the accident**

The *JS Sōryū* (SS-501) is the first boat of *Sōryū-Class* submarines, a diesel-electric attack submarine first in service in 2009, with a displacement of 2900 tonnes (surfaced) and 4.200 tonnes (submerged). She is part of JMSDF Submarine Flotilla 1, Squadron 5, based in Kure, and currently under the command of Cdr. K. Ts.<sup>5</sup>

The bulk carrier *Ocean Artemis*, registered in Hong Kong, is a bulk carrier of 93.103 t summer DWT with a gross tonnage of 51.208, being 229 m long and 38 m wide. The draught is reported to be 14.9 m.<sup>6</sup> Being under investigation, the *Ocean Artemis* is currently anchored in Osaka Bay at the time of this writing.

### **Investigation**

Since the collision also involved a civilian vessel, the accident falls under the jurisdiction of Japan's civilian authorities and is no longer a military-only affair. Thus, the Japan Coast Guard investigates the incident under perspective of injury caused by negligence of professional duty<sup>7</sup>. Due to the public importance of the accident, the Japan Transport Safety Board<sup>8</sup> (which is a division of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism) also sent a delegation to Kōchi Prefecture in order to conduct an on-site damage assessment and interviews with crew members in order to investigate the course of events.

### **How to deal with responsibility**

Japan has a strong tradition of following Confucian values in virtually every aspect of society. While this body of thought is no longer officially included in the curricula of the armed forces, it lives on, appearing in direct references to the Yōmeigaku philosophical school and proverbial phrases (e. g. 知行一致 *chi kō itchi*: Alignment of Cognition and Action; 知学一致 *chi gaku itchi*: Alignment of Cognition and Learning), even in statements by JMSDF top officials.<sup>9</sup> In his thoughts marking the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the JMSDF Staff College, Adm. Kazuki Yamashita, who was the commander of the Staff College from 2014 to 2015, referred to the importance of these

4 Nippon.com: Kaiji toppu, sensuikan shōtotsu de chinsha, ōgata kamotsusen to shōtotsu 3 nin kega [JMSDF leader apologizes for submarine collision; 3 persons injured in collision with bulk carrier] February 09, 2021 <https://www.nippon.com/ja/news/fnn20210209141837/> (accessed February 11, 2021).

5 Kaijō jieitai sensuikantai butai shōkai [JMSDF submarine fleet introduction] <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/sbf/subordinate/sor.html> (accessed February 10, 2021).

6 [https://www.marinetraffic.com/en/ais/details/ships/shipid:689613/mmsi:477814500/imo:9534987/vessel:OCEAN\\_ARTEMIS/:c9796168f3bc00989260de93e934fb35](https://www.marinetraffic.com/en/ais/details/ships/shipid:689613/mmsi:477814500/imo:9534987/vessel:OCEAN_ARTEMIS/:c9796168f3bc00989260de93e934fb35) (accessed February 10, 2021).

7 Kaiji sensuikan jiko Kaijō hoanbu gyōmu jō kashitsu shōgai nado utagai shiya ni shirabe [MSDF submarine collision: Japan Coast Guard to conduct investigation under suspicion of injury due to professional negligence]

<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20210210/k10012858621000.html> (accessed February 10, 2021)

8 Sensuikan shōtotsu jiko sonshō jōtai nado chōsa Unyu anzen'i [Japan Transport Safety Board to investigate damage after submarine collision] February 10, 2021. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20210210/k10012860361000.html> (accessed February 10, 2021)

9 Kazuki Yamashita: Kanbu gakkō kaikaku no suishin: tsugi no 60 nen wo misuete [On promoting reform of the MSDF Staff College: Facing the next 60 years] Heisei 27, July 7 [July 7, 2015]

<https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/navcol/assets/pdf/orientation02.pdf> (accessed February 10, 2021).



concepts within three distinct realms: staff, troops and public. This philosophical background thus provides a valid and robust reference frame for institutional leadership within the armed forces as well as for interaction between armed forces and society on a broader scale and has a strong potential to shape public opinion, which is immediately visible from the following only superficially unrelated news item.

February 9, 2021, just one day after the *Sōryū* incident, marked the 20-year anniversary of the *Ehime Maru* disaster. On February 9, 2001, the United States Navy *Los Angeles-Class* submarine *USS Greenville* collided with the Japanese fishery training ship *Ehime Maru* while performing an emergency ballast blow surfacing maneuver. Struck by the submarine, the *Ehime Maru* sank within minutes, drowning nine of the thirty-five people on board. In a move of building up public pressure, major Japanese news outlets took the opportunity of this sad anniversary and published images<sup>10</sup> of the personal letter written by the former commander of the *USS Greenville*, Scott Waddle, in which he expressed his condolences to the victims of the collision and assumed sole responsibility for the accident. By Japanese standards and values, giving prominent coverage of this behaviour is tantamount to asking JMSDF leadership as well as command and crew of the *Sōryū* to meet their responsibility and act accordingly.

### The human factor

Unfortunately, collisions between JSDMF vessels and civilian vessels, e. g. fishing boats, have occurred in the past, attributed to various reasons. A notable incident was the collision of the *JS Notojima*, a mine sweeper, with a commercial vessel on June 26, 2019. The Japan Transport Safety Board published a finding on December 17, 2020, that the officer in command of the *JS Notojima* had suffered from a bout of microsleep (jp. *inemuri*) and thus was unable to give the necessary commands in time to avoid the collision.<sup>11</sup>

The collision between the guided missile destroyer *JS Atago* (DDG-177) and a civil fishing boat on February 19, 2008, destroyed the fishing boat and left two fishermen missing. The final verdict fell in 2013 when the Tokyo High Court upheld a lower court decision acquitting two ex-officers of the above-mentioned vessel while “downplaying international collision avoidance rules” as an expert in maritime accidents pointed out.<sup>12</sup> The Japan Transport Safety Board had come to the conclusion that insufficient coordination between bridge and combat information center (CIC) with regard to the watchkeeping system played a causal role in the collision.<sup>13</sup> In a letter<sup>14</sup> to then PM Fukuda and Minister of Defense Shigeru Ishiba, The City Council of Kashima, Saga Prefecture, asked how a destroyer equipped with top-notch technical equipment and radar could possibly miss a fishing boat in plain sight, and how the defense policy stands judgment if the life of the citizens which are supposed to be protected is so easily neglected.

10 "Jiko no sekinin ha watashi dake da" moto sensuikanchō ga izoku ate ni shasai no shokan ["The responsibility for this accident is mine alone" former submarine commander apologizes in writing to bereaved family] February 10, 2021. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20210210/k10012858951000.html> (accessed February 10, 2021).

11 Hiroshima, Onomichi Oki no kajitei shōtotsu jiko, teichō inemuri de [Hiroshima: Commander of MSDF boat involved in the Onomichi Oki collision had fallen asleep] 2020-12-18. Chūgoku shinbun dejitaru. [https://www.chugoku-np.co.jp/local/news/article.php?comment\\_id=709989&comment\\_sub\\_id=0&category\\_id=256](https://www.chugoku-np.co.jp/local/news/article.php?comment_id=709989&comment_sub_id=0&category_id=256) (accessed February 10, 2021).

12 Maritime law again downplayed in lawsuit over MSDF Aegis crash killing 2 fishermen. Japan Press Weekly. June 12, 2013. <https://www.japan-press.co.jp/modules/news/index.php?id=5807> (accessed February 10, 2021).

13 Goeikan Atago gyosen Seitoku maru shōtotsu jiken. [The collision between the JMSDF destroyer Atago and the fishing vessel Seitoku] [no date given in document] [https://www.mlit.go.jp/jmat/monoshiri/judai/h20s/h20s\\_atagoseitoku.htm](https://www.mlit.go.jp/jmat/monoshiri/judai/h20s/h20s_atagoseitoku.htm) (accessed February 10, 2021).

14 Saga ken Kashima shi gikai [City Council of Kashima, Saga Prefecture]: Jieitai iijisu kan to gyosen shōtotsu jiken ni kansuru ikensho [Statement concerning the collision incident of a MSDF Aegis ship with a fishing ship] March 26, 2008. [https://www.city.saga-kashima.lg.jp/html/site\\_files/file/gikai/ikensyo\\_pdf/h20/2003\\_02.pdf](https://www.city.saga-kashima.lg.jp/html/site_files/file/gikai/ikensyo_pdf/h20/2003_02.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2021).



On July 23, 1988, the submarine *JS Nadashio* (SS-577) collided with a sport fishing boat, sinking the boat and causing the death of 30 persons and leaving 17 persons with injuries. The captain of the *Nadashio* was sentenced to a suspended 30-month prison term, the skipper of the sports fishing boat was sentenced to a suspended 18-month term.<sup>15</sup> Both were found guilty of negligence.

Another disturbing incident unrelated to maritime safety had happened on board the *Sōryū* a few years ago. In 2013, a captain-rank officer had attempted to commit suicide, and his relatives built their lawsuit against the state seeking damage compensation on “violence by superiors” as crucial factor<sup>16</sup>, which is a sober term for a social problem commonly referred to as “power harassment” (jp. *pawahara*<sup>17</sup>) in Japan.

In a nutshell, the underlying problems of these accidents reflect issues prevalent in Japanese society as a whole and are not a problem “owned” by the armed forces. Notwithstanding, they should be in the focus of the leadership of the armed forces due to their potential impact on combat readiness.

### Concluding remarks

It is not yet possible to explain the events which led to the collision of the *JS Sōryū* with an object as prominent as a huge and loud bulk carrier, especially in the course of a routine training mission. Investigations of matters which may appear deceptively obvious to the untrained eye can take a year or longer before the institutions charged with the investigation publish their conclusive findings. While it is premature to point to any single point of failure in the chain of actions leading to the *Sōryū* collision, it is safe to assume that the human factor played a critical role. According to statistics of the Japan Transport Safety Board, in the 3067 collisions and 1383 ship groundings investigated between 2005 and 2009, more than two thirds (68 %) were caused by negligence in watchkeeping (2056 cases) and 959 cases were caused by inappropriate maneuvers.<sup>18</sup>

For a successful transformation of the Japan Self-Defense Forces towards a resilient and dynamic joint defense force, it will be necessary to examine all aspects of leadership culture, communication across hierarchies and high work load where ill-conceived heroism in tolerating bad workplace situations is the social norm both in civilian life and military. The examples mentioned above are only anecdotal in nature, but they align well with a public awareness of the high price both individual members of society and, in consequence, the nation as a whole have to pay if no mitigating action is taken.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

15 Ill-fated sub *Nadashio* sails off to scrap yard. June 2, 2001. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2001/06/02/national/ill-fated-sub-nadashio-sails-off-to-scrap-yard/> (accessed February 11, 2021).

16 Kaiji taiin: “jōkan no bōryoku de jisatsu misui” ... kazoku ga kuni teiso he [MSDF crew member: “suicide attempt under violence of superior” ... relatives to file lawsuit against state. January 13, 2016. <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20160113/k00/00m/040/134000c> (accessed February 10, 2021).

17 Kōsei rōdō shō [Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare]: *Shokuba no ijime, iyagarase mondai ni kansuru entaku kaigi wākingu gurūpu hōkoku* [Roundtable Working Group Report on Bullying and Harassment Issues in the Workplace] January 30, Heisei 24 [2012]. <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/houdou/2r98520000021i2v-att/2r98520000021i4l.pdf> (accessed February 12, 2021).

18 Japan Coast Guard: *Shōtotsu, noriage jiko ni chūi!* [Be aware of collisions and groundings!] June 26, 2018. [https://www6.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/info/keihatsu/20180626\\_noriage.pdf](https://www6.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/info/keihatsu/20180626_noriage.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2021).



## About the Author of this Issue

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