

Australian military launches first amphibious assault ship

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The Australian Navy's first Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD), HMAS Canberra, was officially commissioned in Sydney Harbour on November 28. With a displacement of 27,500 tonnes and length of 233 metres, it is the largest vessel ever put into service by the Australian military. A second LHD, named Adelaide, is in the final stages of construction and scheduled to be commissioned in 2016. Over \$3 billion has been spent acquiring the two ships.

The LHDs have only one purpose: to give the Australian military a significant capability to transport troops and armoured vehicles, land them on a foreign shore and provide them with helicopter air support. The Canberra will carry four landing craft, six to eight helicopters and at least a 400-strong marine assault force. It is capable of carrying up to 110 vehicles and their crews, including tanks, for a total troop complement of around 1,000.

Defence Minister David Johnson boasted that when both ships are operational, they will be able to "land a force of more than 2,000 personnel by helicopter and water craft, along with all their weapons, ammunition, vehicles and stores." Both vessels, like the Spanish design on which they are based, have flight decks and could theoretically be transformed into mini-aircraft carriers. They could carry a complement of up to eight short take-off and vertical landing jet fighters, such as the F-35B model of the Joint Strike Fighter.

The decision to acquire the LHDs dates back to 1999 and the Australian-led military occupation of East Timor. Following a referendum on independence from Indonesia, the Australian government was determined to ensure that the new statelet was firmly under its influence. It pushed for command of a UN peacekeeping force on the pretext of providing humanitarian and security assistance. The Australian

Navy's ability to transport, land, service and supply over 5,000 military personnel, however, relied heavily on the assistance of US ships and aircraft.

The limitations of the Australian military's transport capabilities were also revealed in 2003, when a military and police force was hurriedly sent to occupy the Solomon Islands and quell in-fighting between rival factions of the island's elite that threatened to impact on Australian strategic and economic interests in the South Pacific.

The LHDs were originally intended to enhance further operations to impose Australian dictates on small Pacific islands. Their role has been vastly expanded since Australia enlisted as one of the main partners in the aggressive US military "pivot to Asia," targeted against China.

In March, the US-based *Stars and Stripes* commented that the development of amphibious forces by Australia and Japan could help the US military "pick up some of the slack" created by a small reduction in US Marine numbers and shortages in its own large landing vessels. Australian Army Brigadier Mick Ryan said the Australian force assembled to operate with the LHDs "is expected to work closely with US marines, but is not modelled after them." The Australian unit will train closely with the marines that rotate into Darwin for six months of the year.

In May, another *Stars and Stripes* article was headlined "US allies in Pacific adding 'mini-carriers' to their fleets." The Australian LHDs, Australian Navy Commodore Peter Quinn noted, were "designed to accommodate landing craft used by the US marines." Over the next several years, training would take place by the Australian ships on "integrating aircraft" used by American forces as well, such as the tilt-rotor, vertical take-off Osprey.

Quinn stated: “You will see them [the LHDs] out and about and see them throughout Asia and the Western Pacific. By 2016 to 2017, we will have a very capable amphibious force in the Australian Defence Force exercising a lot with the US.” Potentially, the ships could also be used to transport American troops.

The deployment of Australian troops by the LHDs figured prominently in the Asian war scenarios envisaged in a November report published by Rory Medcalf and James Brown for the Australian strategic think tank, the Lowy Institute.

The report’s premise is that Australian imperialism will remain an unconditional ally of the US as strategic and military tensions with China continue to increase dramatically because of the US pivot. The authors stated: “Although the probability of war in Asia is small, it is real, and certainly more so than a few years ago.”

Scenarios the report projects as possibilities include:

- * Australia, at Washington’s request, dispatching a naval task force to the South China Sea to assist in confronting supposed Chinese aggression against the Philippines and Vietnam.

- * Troops being deployed aboard amphibious assault ships to quell social unrest and instability in Papua New Guinea. The objective, defined earlier in the report, would be to prevent any other power, above all China, gaining influence over Australia’s main South Pacific client state.

- * A naval fleet being dispatched, with ground forces aboard amphibious assault ships, at the request of the US and other countries, to rescue foreign nationals following a natural disaster and political chaos in Burma (Myanmar).

- * A similar naval fleet being sent to maintain Australian control over its strategic Cocos Island territory in the Indian Ocean, in the face of alleged Chinese threats.

Such scenarios, focussed on the newly acquired Australian naval assets being utilised as part of US-led military operations against China, are not idle speculation. In what one journalist described as an ominous warning, Prime Minister Tony Abbott stated at last Friday’s commissioning of the Canberra: “You never know what is over the horizon. Our Navy not only protects our country, but our friends and allies too.”



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