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The future of the Amphibious Task Force

an address to the Institute on 28 May 2013 by
Captain R. J. Leggatt, CSC, RAN
Commander, Australian Amphibious Task Group¹



The Australian Defence Force is developing an amphibious task force with United States and United Kingdom assistance. Based on two new 27,000 tonne amphibious assault ships, this will be a major leap in Australia's amphibious capability and will be a key enabler of Australia's maritime strategy.

Key words: Australia; maritime strategy; amphibious operations; amphibious assault ships.

The amphibious task force is a very exciting but at the same time challenging capability for the Australian Defence Force (ADF). The level of collaborative effort across the ADF on the development of the amphibious capability has been excellent and, in general, we are embracing the opportunities that it presents. We have made some great progress, especially over the last 18 months, and we have a good plan for the future in order to realise the amphibious task force capability.

We should be in no doubt, however, about the complexity of the challenges we face and we need to carefully manage expectations about what can be done and when. Forums such as this help us to manage these expectations. If we do not view this as a totally new capability and work at understanding what we can do with it, we will find it difficult to realise its full potential. If we get this right and realise the full potential, we would probably be one of only 8 to 10 nations that would be able to deploy this type of incredibly flexible force.

I will begin by explaining how an amphibious task force capability fits into Australia's maritime strategy and then explain what an amphibious task force can contribute to a maritime strategy. I will not detail the 'tactical' level of the capability – *i.e.* the specifics of ships, vehicles, and aircraft that will make up the Amphibious Task Force – although I will touch on this near the end.

Australia's Maritime Strategy

The Chief of Navy, in recent speeches, has focused on a maritime strategy and the need for a genuine maritime school of

thought in Australia. I want to emphasise that a maritime strategy is not all about Navy. Any maritime strategy must draw on all the Australian Defence Organisation's capabilities, as well as be integrated with other national capabilities, drawing on all instruments of national power.

Figure 1 depicts Australian maritime sovereignty, sovereign rights, and key transport and communications lanes, and those of our neighbours. It provides a different way of looking at the ocean and the areas where sovereign rights can be exercised. In order for the ADF to have an effective maritime strategy, we need to understand all dimensions of our maritime environment, including its terrain and, increasingly, the management of movement and communications on that terrain. There are many nuances and complexities embedded in this chart that can significantly impact our ability to operate if we do not understand them.

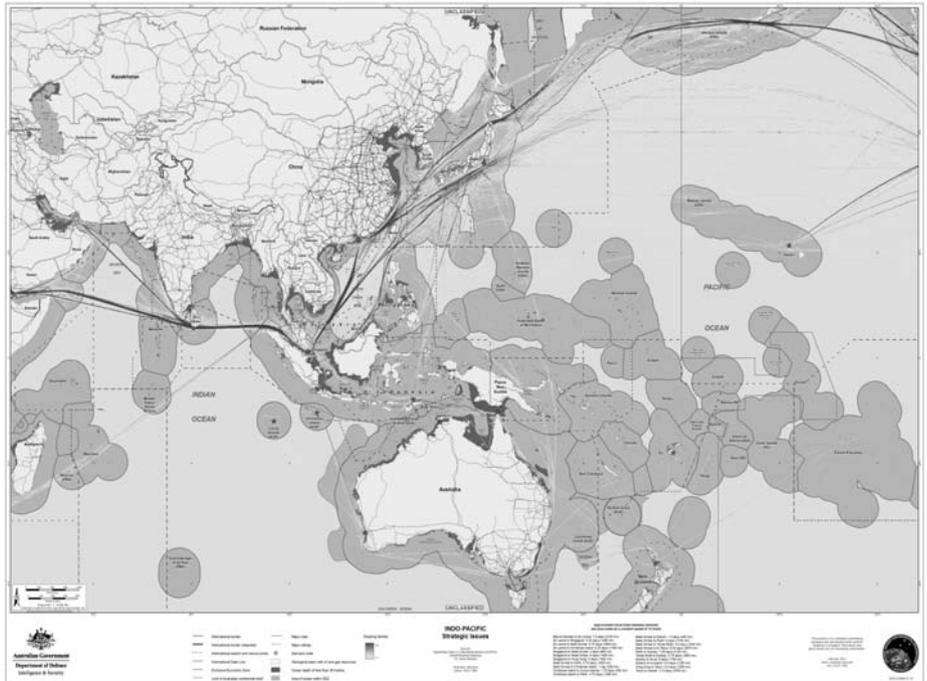


Figure 1: Chart depicting maritime sovereignty and sea lines of communication of Australia and its neighbours [Department of Defence]

¹E-mail: raymond.leggatt@defence.gov.au

In looking at this chart there are a few things that must be recognised:

- the sheer scale of our sovereignty and the areas where we can exercise sovereign rights;
- our terms of trade play a significant role in the growth of our real gross national income;
- the fundamental vulnerabilities that our geo-strategic situation exposes us to in such a highly interconnected and just-in-time economic system; and
- the importance of collaboration and cooperation in keeping our global maritime trading system free and open – no single maritime-focused force can achieve this mission so there must be cooperative arrangements and contributions across the whole system.

Having recognised these features, what do they mean for a maritime strategy? As the Chief of Navy has said on a number of occasions, there is a strong argument that suggests our economic centre of gravity is not the resources in and on the land, nor the manufacturing capacity of our industry. Rather, it is our ability to trade – the importance of getting imports in and, critically, exports out.

Given the factors I have mentioned, I suggest that decisive outcomes in a campaign against Australia can be achieved by effects at sea and not necessarily ashore and not necessarily proximate to the Australian continent. This will not always be the case, but I think it is safe to say actions taken at sea now have a far greater strategic significance than heretofore.

This gives the ADF a central role in a crucial national mission: the protection of our ability to trade – the very thing that underpins our national prosperity. It means that we need an ADF that has both reach and endurance, and the ability to deploy and sustain credible, potent land forces to support the broader national objectives. Therefore, while protecting our trade, and contributing to the protection of sea lines of communication more broadly, is fundamental to a maritime strategy, so too is the ability to project power across the spectrum of conflict from presence to war-fighting.

Maritime power projection

There is no doubt that the maritime power-projection capabilities of Australia's new landing-helicopter-dock amphibious assault ships (LHDs), when combined with the other parts of the broader ADF structure, will significantly enhance our ability to execute a maritime strategy. Maritime power projection is a critical capability for the ADF, particularly in its regional role of contributing to the security and stability of the South Pacific and East Timor, so a dedicated focus on further developing the competencies needed is crucial.

At the very heart of maritime power projection is the delivery of force from the sea, be that through naval fires or the use and support of land forces in an amphibious activity. Power projection, however, does

not always involve the use of military forces in a 'hard power' way. Humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and non-combatant evacuation operations, of course, manifest the same foundation techniques and capabilities used for harder-edged power-projection missions. In the future Amphibious Task Group we will have the core of the ADF's hard and soft power-projection capability.

As important as this capability is for the ADF, however, we must ensure that it is not at the expense of the other individual domain (*i.e.* sea, land, air) war-fighting disciplines that we must maintain to deliver the overall joint effect. It is crucial, for example, that we have frigates and submarines that can be operated and sustained where they need to be in this system; and the same can be said for air capabilities.

Amphibious Task Force Capabilities

Having provided some brief context on where the future amphibious task force sits within an overall maritime strategy, I will now explain the capabilities that an amphibious task force provides.

- It can **demonstrate** capability by publicly sailing early to show will, intent and ability to the enemy or aggressor; or, it can be despatched without signal, if political understatement and diplomatic sensitivities dictate. This can all be done without offence to the other nation by taking passage through international waters without infringing territorial boundaries.
- It can provide **poise** – the maritime force can poise at sea, raid, or land on a potentially hostile shore at the time and place of political choice, entirely independent of shore infrastructure. It does not have to be committed.
- It can provide **presence**. In common with all naval forces, while being poised, it offers presence without occupation.
- Lastly, it can provide **deterrence** without commitment.

While the landing force is embarked, it can operate almost indefinitely. Once ashore, it can be sustained for protracted operations by its shipping and integral logistics organisation. As part of an integrated maritime capability, it has utility at all levels of potential conflict, from presence to war-fighting. This means that the force is: politically flexible, offering many options to government; militarily flexible; and sustainable.

Amphibious Task Force Composition

So, in order to provide this type of flexibility, what kind of force are we talking about? There is a step change, or more of a leap, involved in the future capability. Table 1 illustrates this. We are talking about very significant changes, including moving from an embarked force of 1100 to a capability of over 2500.

The extent of the leap in capability is evident when one considers that in 2010 we were operating landing platforms, general (LPAs), of 8000 tonnes and will soon

Table 1: The step-change in Australian amphibious capability sought between 2010 and 2017.

	2010 number	2010 tonnage	2017 number	2017 tonnage
LSH – landing ship, headquarters – 5,700t	1	5,700	0	0
LPA – landing platform, general – 8,450t	2	16,900	0	0
LCH – landing craft, heavy – 503t	6	3,018	0	0
LCM – landing craft, mechanical – 100t	15	1,500	12	1,200
LHD – amphibious assault ship – 27,000t	0	0	2	54,000
LSD – landing ship, dock – 16,000t	0	0	1	16,000
LCH replacement (JP2048 Phase 5) – 1,300t	0	0	6	7,800
Total	24	27,118	21	79,000
Embarked force	1,115		2,600	
Helicopters	8		24 – 28	
Sea state limitations			Level 2	Level 4

be operating landing-helicopter-dock amphibious assault ships (LHDs) of 27,000 tonnes, which in turn may be compared to our last aircraft carrier, HMAS *Melbourne*, which was 22,000 tonnes. Each LPA had a level 3 hospital with one operating theatre and limited intensive care and X-ray capacity; whereas each LHD will have a level 3 hospital with two operating theatres, eight intensive care units, 20+ MDU beds, X-ray *etc.*

I also want to emphasise the change in manoeuvre. Previous thinking was based around rigid linear ship-to-shore movement: ferrying forces to the beach and securing a 'lodgement' (beach-head), before breaking out to achieve the objective. We need to move away from that thinking. We are moving to high mobility, rapid-tempo manoeuvre, with a focus directly on the objective. It does not require the establishment of a beach-head *i.e.* deployment direct from the ship to the objective is achievable. Logistics are sea-based, as are networked fires and command-and-control capability.

The phases of an amphibious operation involving the future force are also complex, requiring detailed and synchronised planning. The 'shaping' phase in the lead up to the actual amphibious operation is particularly important and can commence months before the amphibious task force arrives in the area of operations. The types of activities that can occur in the shaping phase include operations to 'shape' the operating area to our advantage, such as special force and submarine operations, sea/air control, strike, electronic warfare, intelligence gathering, surveillance, reconnaissance and the like. The forces involved are very much joint² in nature and therefore planning must be integrated and cannot be done in isolation.

The make-up of an amphibious task force will always vary depending on mission, tasks and readiness notice. The 'amphibious ready element' (ARE) will be the enduring capability and will be centred around one

LHD and an embarked force of a combat team³ and associated enablers. The first ARE will be mounted and certified in the first half of 2015 when it will be maintained at a relatively-short readiness notice. It is envisaged that the ARE will conduct a certification process every two years with a subsequent 'on line' period of 18 months. There will also be a larger 'amphibious ready group' (ARG) centred around the two LHDs and the landing ship, dock (LSD), HMAS *Choules*, and significant enabling and supporting forces. This is a large and capable force and represents an ADF main effort. For these reasons, it cannot be maintained at a short readiness notice. The plan is to prove this capability in 2017. Once proved, the 'on line' capability will revert to the ARE. We have not yet determined how often we as the ADF will go through a mounting and certification cycle of the ARG.

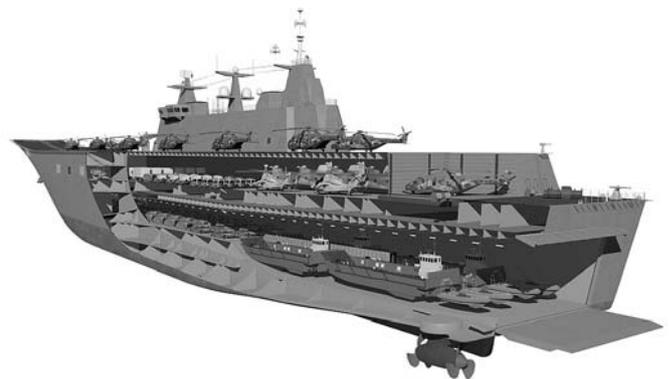


Figure 2: Canberra-class LHD amphibious assault ship concept (Department of Defence)

Joint Amphibious Architecture

I want to emphasise that this capability is not just about platforms. Equally important for all of us in the ADF is developing joint amphibious architecture. Our concepts are maturing, our joint command-and-control construct is developing, particularly the reorientation of the Deployable Joint Force Headquarters around this capability. Navy has completed our first phase of moving members of the Fleet Battle Staff from Sydney

²'Joint' in this context means tri-service, in contrast to single-service Navy.
³A rifle company group

to Brisbane, with the aim to have all of the Fleet Battle Staff and Amphibious Task Group command staff moved to Brisbane by the end of 2014. My Amphibious Task Group staff has expanded considerably since the start of the year, with seven new army positions and two air force positions. I am expecting a further 21 positions to be established before the end of next year in order to form the enduring command-and-control capability for the Task Group.

The decision to orientate the 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (2 RAR), toward amphibious operations has been an extremely important decision. We have developed a very close relationship with 2 RAR which will be vital for future success.

The development and verification of a joint mounting, collective training and certification model in order to train and certify all the enablers that make up the Amphibious Task Group has been a very complex and challenging piece of work. However, it is now a working model with verification underway and in fact I deploy in early June (2013) to conduct a large amphibious exercise in order to validate the second block training period of the model. This is the first time that we have developed a robust joint mounting and certification model. Previously, the single services prepared their forces pretty much in isolation with no real certification regime when they came together. The model that we are now validating has a point where forces reach a handover to 'group training', where they then progress through a joint collective training and certification cycle before achieving 'mission ready' status.

Challenges

We, of course, still have some significant challenges in order to realise this capability. These include: integration (communications; vehicles; explosive ordnance); training (joint collective training and certification; maintaining currency); resources (budget; personnel; aviation); and concurrency (*i.e.* delivering multiple build and commission projects concurrently, such as the landing-helicopter-dock amphibious assault ships; landing craft, mechanised 1E; multi-role helicopter, MRH 90; armoured reconnaissance helicopters; Army vehicles and communications projects; air-warfare destroyers).

These challenges are not really surprising when you consider the step change in capability that we are moving to and the level of complexity involved in realising an enduring amphibious task group. The good

thing is that we have recognised these challenges and are working hard to identify a way forward. We are also getting excellent assistance from the United States and the United Kingdom, including the loan of highly experienced personnel to help us work through these challenges. Just on my staff I have two Royal Marines (a colonel and a major) and a United States Navy lieutenant commander who has come directly from the staff of an amphibious squadron.

Even these nations, with decades of amphibious experience, find this capability challenging. Many of the challenges that we face are lessons that the United States and the United Kingdom are re-learning. Their focus on Afghanistan over the last 10 years has eroded amphibious skills. Certainly, in many areas, we are very much learning together, which has created a very good interactive environment. Further, the relationship that we have developed with the Spanish Amada is outstanding and we are learning much from their experiences of operating the LHD.

Conclusion

The amphibious task force we are developing provides a leap in capability for the ADF and new strategic options for the Australian Government. I have described how this capability fits into the overall maritime strategy for Australia. It is indeed a unique capability and, if its potential is fully realised, will provide incredible flexibility from the tactical to the strategic level.

The Author: Captain Ray Leggatt joined the Royal Australian Navy as a seaman officer in 1983. He served in the destroyer escort HMAS *Yarra*, gained his bridge watchkeeping certificate in HMAS *Sydney*, and was an officer-of-the-watch in HMAS *Canberra*. After navigation training, he became navigating officer of the patrol boat HMAS *Gawler*. In 1989, he qualified as an air intercept controller before returning to sea in the destroyer HMAS *Brisbane* in which he served as air controller in the Arabian Gulf during the 1990-91 Gulf War. After a period ashore, he returned to sea in HMA Ships *Melbourne* (twice) and *Sydney*. A decade ashore followed in staff postings both in Australia and overseas. In January 2008, he assumed command of HMAS *Watson* and the position of Training Authority Maritime Warfare. He was awarded the Conspicuous Service Cross for this service. He assumed command of the Australian Amphibious Task Group and Fleet Battle Staff in August 2011. [Photo of Captain Leggatt: Colonel J. M. Hutcheson, MC]