

Capability of First Resort?

Australia's Future Amphibious Requirement

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By Aldo Borgu

Background

In releasing the Defence Capability Review in November 2003 the Minister for Defence first revealed the government's intention to replace the Australian Defence Forces' (ADF) amphibious ships—HMAS Tobruk, Manoora and Kanimbla—with two much larger amphibious vessels and an as yet unspecified sealift ship. A specific type of vessel wasn't detailed at the time but the Chief of Navy did indicate that the requirement was predicated on the number

of helicopters needed (at least 5–6 landing spots per ship) and that called for a ship in the order of 20,000 tons or more.

These ships are far larger than the government's 2000 Defence White Paper originally intended (in fact twice as large). The Defence Capability Plan (DCP) 2004, released in February, states that a "new class of larger amphibious vessel" will replace Tobruk and one of the amphibious transport ships (LPAs) and it does state they will be replaced by just two ships.



An Australian army landing craft medium disembarks armoured personnel carriers. © Defence Department

The DCP specifies that the vessels “will have a significant aviation and organic watercraft capability to support effective discharge and support of land forces. This will include multiple aircraft landing spots per ship in addition to a floodable well deck facility and a significant command and control capability.”

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A final decision on the choice of ship was to be made in June 2004 but has now been delayed until the end of 2005. This eighteen month delay now provides the government with the opportunity to consider the amphibious ship acquisition from a holistic and strategic perspective. That includes properly assessing what type and how many ships will best meet the ADF requirement as well as more firmly linking the amphibious purchase to the acquisition of troop lift helicopters and sealift ships. The aim of this paper is to highlight the

issues and options that need to be considered in taking such a strategic approach.

Current Amphibious Capability

The ADF doesn't have an integrated amphibious capability along the lines of the United States Navy and Marine Corps. Australia maintains a more modest amphibious capability, but one that has gone through some major enhancements over the past five years albeit from a low base. And it's a capability that has proven repeatedly useful to the government over that time. It has been described by the Chief of Defence Force as Australia's capability of first report and given the archipelagic nature of Australia's region this is hardly surprising.

Our experiences with the 1999 East Timor deployment highlighted not only the potential requirement for amphibious operations but also the stark lack of capability the ADF had at the time. It was this lack of capability that led the government to lease a fast catamaran, HMAS Jervis Bay (though it was a sea transport ship not an amphibious ship), until the refurbished LPAs Manoora and Kanimbla entered into service.

Future Amphibious Projects

Joint Project (JP) 2048 “Amphibious Deployment and Sustainment Capability” has brought together a number of different projects and split them up into numerous phases to be implemented over the next ten years at a total cost of between \$1.8–2.5 billion.

- Phase 1A is currently in progress and will result in the purchase of landing craft that will be used on the two LPAs, HMAS Manoora and Kanimbla for the remainder of their service.
- Phase 2 is a Project Definition Study to identify options for replacing the current ADF amphibious capability.
- Phase 3 is designed to acquire new landing craft that will operate from the new amphibious ships and will replace the ship-to-shore movement capabilities of the LCM8, LCH and new LPA landing craft acquired under Phase 1A. This phase will be decided in 2005/06 with an in-service delivery of 2009/11 at a cost of \$150–200m.
- Phase 4 has three sub-phases as follows:
 - Phase 4A will replace HMAS Tobruk in 2010 with a larger class of amphibious vessel to be decided in 2005/06.
 - Phase 4B will replace one of the LPAs with a similar larger amphibious vessel in 2013. The total cost of Phases 4A/B is \$1500–2000m.
 - Phase 4C will see the second LPA replaced with a “strategic sealift capability” in 2016 with a year of decision in 2013/14 at a cost of \$150–200m.

The ADF's current capability is provided by the following ships:

- Two amphibious transport ships (LPA) HMAS Manoora and Kanimbla to be replaced by 2015;
- One heavy landing ship (LSH) HMAS Tobruk to be replaced in 2010;
- Six heavy landing craft (LCH) to be retired from 2008; and
- Fifteen medium landing craft (LCM8) to be replaced in 2010.

The DCP 2004 contains a sizeable investment in amphibious capability in order to replace the above ships over the next ten years (see box on p. 2). At the same time as he released the DCP, the Minister for Defence announced that Defence would bring forward advice to government on a preferred design for the amphibious ships by the end of June 2004.

However in May 2004 the Minister announced that tenders for the amphibious vessels would be issued in early 2005 with a preferred tenderer to be identified by late 2005. No reason was given for the eighteen-month delay and the Minister has stated the delay will not affect the planned in service delivery of

2010. Fast tracking the Air Warfare Destroyers acquisition may be one reason but another may have to do with doubts over the current costings for the amphibious vessels (see p. 7). The main reason is likely to be the short time frame Defence gave the selected tenderers to come up with data on their respective bids and the time allowed to analyse the decision (less than 4 months). This meant Defence simply didn't have enough time to make an informed multi-billion dollar decision.

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Defence's Capability Requirement

The Minister stated that the lift and deployment requirements of the 2000 White Paper have driven the choice of amphibious vessels. Army's current doctrine for amphibious operations is governed by their Manoeuvre Operations in the Littoral Environment (MOLE) concept which is also Army's principal warfighting concept.



HMAS Tobruk. © Defence Department

In effect MOLE describes how the Army will be employed as part of a joint force within our immediate neighbourhood and involves the conduct of rapid and simultaneous operations to “shock” an enemy. Within MOLE the Entry from Air and Sea (EAS) concept further specifies the amphibious requirement.

Army's amphibious approach is to get a combined arms team of battle group size onto the shore in a single tidal window. This requires a mix of both watercraft and helicopters. To undertake MOLE Army has determined they need an amphibious afloat force of about 1200 soldiers (defined as a battalion group). That means you need the capability to maintain a total of approximately 2000 personnel afloat (the other personnel required are headquarters and logistics personnel, aviation and watercraft crews). The aviation (helicopter) elements of MOLE must be able to generate the simultaneous delivery of up to 120–220 personnel. These requirements mean you need a balance of both aviation and watercraft capabilities. Helicopters provide your initial means for rapid deployment of light troops while landing craft are the means with which you move the bulk of your troops and their heavy equipment including all vehicles.

It should be noted that military operations such as specified in MOLE form only part of the requirement for the amphibious ships, albeit a major part. The ships will also have an important role to play across the full spectrum of operations including evacuation operations and humanitarian and disaster relief, especially within our immediate region. There is also the need for the amphibious capability to logistically sustain any land elements ashore.

The Idiot's Guide to Amphibious Operations

For the benefit of the uninitiated, an amphibious operation is essentially a tactical military operation launched from the sea with the aim of putting a landing force on shore without using ports, slipways or terminals. It involves significant air assets and is probably the best example of the need for a joint approach to warfare (involving cooperation

between all three Services—Army, Navy and Air Force) and hence is one of the more demanding military operations to undertake. There are a number of different types of amphibious operations, the most notable include amphibious assault and amphibious transport (also known as military support operations).

Amphibious assault involves putting a force on a hostile or potentially hostile shore. It doesn't imply landing across a defended beach but it does imply that the force must build up rapidly enough to be capable of defending itself before an enemy can react. Amphibious transport (or lodgement) involves moving a landing force in much more benign circumstances. At present Australia has more of an amphibious transport capability. While the proposed new ships—no matter what size they are—will enhance the ADF's amphibious assault capabilities, the aim here is not to have a capability to re-enact the D-Day Normandy landings. As the Chief of Army stated in March 2004, the Army is “not talking here about a doctrine of beach assault”.

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Rather than just operate one type of ship most defence forces that are serious about developing an amphibious capability use a combination of either LHD, LPD or LSD vessels. And an important complementary capability to amphibious vessels is sealift or transport ships. Sealift ships aren't amphibious ships as most types require a port to offload their cargo and are usually built to commercial rather than military standards and requirements.

The primary means of delivering amphibious forces is by landing craft and helicopters. The main point to consider here is that you need to have a balanced capability of both. Landing craft have the advantage of moving large numbers of troops as well as heavy equipment

such as armoured vehicles, tanks and heavy engineering plant. They are however, slow and dependent on suitable sea conditions, beaches and tides. Helicopters can only move much smaller amounts of troops with light equipment but they have the advantage of being faster, less susceptible to sea conditions and give direct access from beyond the horizon to objectives well inland. So while you need both to undertake a successful amphibious operation, delivery of real combat weight is more dependant on how many landing craft you can operate whereas agility and surprise are more dependent on helicopters.

The Options

In contrast to its approach on submarine and surface combatants (buying American), the government has opted for a shortlist of just two European designs for its amphibious ships. That's not too surprising, as the US does not have a ship to match Defence's capability requirements. Their LHDs are 40,000 tons and take a crew of some 850–1,000 personnel while their LPDs are about 25,000 tons but still only have two helicopter spots. Neither type is affordable within the allocated budget.

Types of Amphibious Ships

In order to undertake amphibious operations a variety of specialised seagoing ships are used. Some of the more notable include:

- **LPH—Landing Platform Helicopter**—large vessels, around 20,000 tons, generally have a full-length flat deck (ie the flat deck runs the full-length of the ship) for aviation operations, in effect they are a mini-aircraft carrier. These ships carry helicopters as the primary means of delivering troops (through multiple landing/take-off spots, usually about six). They can also carry vehicles and landing craft but have no dock so require stable seas to unload them over ramps and pontoons. They will also usually have substantial command and control facilities.
- **LHD—Landing Helicopter Dock**—similar to an LPH however they also have a dock (hence the D in LHD). A well-dock is a huge area at the end of an amphibious ship that lowers and floods with water that enables you to safely launch loaded landing craft directly from the ship in much higher sea states than conventional stern door equipped ships. A well-dock will normally carry about 4 medium sized landing craft (LCMs).
- **LPD—Landing Platform Dock**—generally about half the size of a LHD (which means they carry less troops and cargo), they have the same well-dock capabilities of a LHD (hence carry the same number of landing craft) with more limited helicopter landing spots and hangar space (usually about two spots with hangar space for up to six helicopters). LPDs have command and control capabilities which may range from fairly modest up to and beyond those found in LHDs.
- **LSD—Landing Ship Dock**—basically a simplified LPD without any command and control facilities, they have a dock and a helicopter flight deck but are generally unlikely to have hangar space.
- **LSL—Landing Ship Logistics**—able to carry heavy equipment, vehicles and troops, lands them by itself through a ramp rather than using landing craft or helicopters.
- **LCU—Landing Craft Utility**—Larger than a LCM at about 120–300 tonnes. Able to carry heavier tanks (M1A1 Abrahms) in higher sea states than a LCM. An amphibious sea-going vessel needs a significantly larger dock to carry 4 LCUs.
- **LCM—Landing Craft Medium (or Mechanised)**—25m long ramped vessels (100–120 tons) that can land on a beach. Australia's LCMs can carry either one Leopard Mk1 main battle tank, two armoured vehicles or up to 100 troops. Usually 4 LCMs can be carried in a LHD or LPD.



HMAS *Manoora*. © Defence Department

In February 2004 Defence released a Request for Information (RFI) restricting the competition to two designs. The competing tenderers and designs are the Spanish Strategic Projection Ship (Buque de Proyeccion Estrategica—BPE) built by the Izar company and the French Mistral Projection and Command Ship (Batiment de Projection et de Commandement—BPC) built by the Armaris

consortium of Thales and DCN shipyard. Both ships are currently being built for their respective parent navies. Izar is expected to hand over its first BPE to the Spanish Navy in 2008 while the French Navy is intending to commission the first BPC in 2005 and take delivery of a second ship in 2006. The respective characteristics of the two ships are as follows:

Ship	Displacement (tons)	Range (nm)	Crew	Troops	Vehicles (sq metres)	Helicopters	Landing Craft
LPA	8,500	14,000	210	450	700	4 (2 spots) ¹	2 LCM8
French BPC ²	24,000	11,000	177	1000	1000 ³	16 (6 spots)	4 LCM
Spanish BPE	27,000	9,000	240	1100	2000	11 (6 spots)	4 LCM

1. The LPA can only carry S-70 Blackhawk helicopters in its hangar (total of four). The figures for the other ships are for the larger NH-90 helicopter. The LPA has two landing spots (three once the landing craft are launched and the forward flight deck cleared).
2. The French LHD was shortened by 14.5 m to reduce cost for the French Navy but in order to better meet the ADF requirement the French are offering the full length original design. The data above reflects the full length version.
3. The ratio of troops/vehicles/helicopters is a function of space available and hence results from trade-offs between the three. For example you can carry more troops at a cost of less vehicles and helicopters and so on. The French LHD can also accommodate more vehicles in its hangar (extra 1800 square metres).

Overall the Spanish BPE was originally viewed as the ship best meeting the ADF's requirements but the French move to offer the longer BPC (see note 3 on p. 6) does even up the contest. The French ship has the advantage of already being in the water—the Spanish design is apparently still being finalised. Defence is understood to be stipulating a military off-the-shelf solution and the longer French version has not been built and this represents an element of risk. The Spanish design has a larger dock and vehicle deck while the French vessel has a larger helicopter hangar.

Issues

Budget

There are credible questions over whether the revised budget allocations for the two larger ships as currently contained in the 2004 Defence Capability Plan are adequate. The 2000 DCP project to replace the two LPAs was originally costed at \$1000–1500 million while the new 2004 project to purchase two much larger amphibious ships will cost \$1500–2000 million.

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These figures look worse when you factor in the third replacement ship, the sea-lift ship. The total funding in the 2000 DCP for three ships to replace the Tobruk and two LPAs came to \$1350–1950 million. The funding in the 2004 DCP for three ships—two of those much larger and more expensive than anticipated—comes to \$1650–2200 million, an overall increase of only \$250–300 million. Given the expansion of capability that is being sought here the funding provided in the 2004 DCP may not prove to be enough. That's probably one of the reasons why the project has been delayed some eighteen months, as it will give Defence time to sort out the costing issues.

The existing budget allocation may be swallowed up by just the cost of the ships themselves. Depending on how the ships will be equipped—in terms of command and control facilities, medical capabilities, NBC protection—the project could easily require hundreds of millions dollars in additional funds to become fully operational. But by the same token it's doubtful whether the existing allocation could actually fund the purchase of four smaller ships. Depending on how they are equipped a 12,000 ton LPD would likely cost about 60–65% that of a larger 27,000 ton LHD.

Industry

A decision of successful tender for the large amphibious ships is expected at the end of 2005. Assuming all of the issues are dealt with satisfactorily a contract could be signed soon after that announcement with the first cutting of steel expected some six months later. It's understood that the Spanish BPE would take up to 5 years to build while the French BPC could be delivered after 4 years. These are based on overseas build timelines, the length of time taken to build the ships in Australia would ultimately depend on Australian industry.

Given the size of the ships to be constructed (24–27,000 ton, 210–230m long); the requirement that the first ship will be delivered by 2010; the lack of identifiable Australian shipbuilding facilities to handle such a build; and uncertainty as to what sort of infrastructure investment is required, there should be considerable doubt as to whether the ambitious timetable is in fact possible. Another advantage of the eighteen month delay in decision making means we should have a much better idea as to Australian industry's capabilities to build the ships and whether it makes sense to build at least the first ship overseas. This will depend on the outcomes of the Risk Reduction Design Strategy that Defence is currently engaged in with Australian industry.

Compared to the Minister's statements and the intention to retire Tobruk in 2010 the DCP 2004 gives an in service delivery of 2010–12 for the first of the new larger amphibious ships.

This may well reflect the reality that 2012 is more achievable. That leaves government with the dilemma of whether to extend the life of Tobruk another two years, assuming that is cost effective or accept a slight gap in capability for that period of time. Tobruk is the youngest of the amphibious ships and there should be no problem of extending its service by at least five years.

Big ships versus smaller ships

It remains unknown to what degree Defence’s preference for the larger ships was exposed to contestability by the government. In particular we don’t know to what degree the government tested Defence’s belief that two large amphibious ships constitutes the best choice for Australia’s future amphibious capability and the best choice to give the government the widest range of deployment options.

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No real reason has been given for the choice of the larger vessels and limiting ADF capability to just two amphibious ships. The Minister said that both Army and Navy had both concluded that replacing the ADF’s amphibious lift ships

“by those of much the same size as what we have already” would not achieve the lift requirements of the White Paper and that’s why the government decided to move to larger ships. However the 2001 DCP never envisaged buying ships similar in size to HMAS Manoora and Kanimbla, not least because they don’t exist and while the 12,000 ton LPDs are about the same length as the LPAs they are actually 50% larger and far more capable.

The Chief of Navy recently stated that “smaller vessels require similar crew sizes to that of the two large ships as well as additional fuel and maintenance costs and resources.” While four LPDs would require at least an additional 280 naval personnel it seems strange that 280 people out of a Navy consisting of some 13,000 personnel would be a major factor determining the choice of ship rather than the ADF’s amphibious capability requirements.

Prior to the announcement being made, internal Army and DSTO simulation, modelling and experimentation had all pointed to a clear preference within Defence for a larger number (at least 4) of somewhat smaller 12,000 ton LPDs. It also indicated a preference for the largest possible helicopters and, although it didn’t say as much, these preferences were likely interdependent. This experimentation was amongst the most extensive and exhaustive the Army has ever undertaken and represented about nine months of solid analysis.

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2. Spanish LPD data is based on the Castilla, the second ship of the Galicia class LPD. The Dutch equivalent LPD (they are based on a joint design) is 25% larger, can carry more troops and vehicles with less crew.

Pros and cons

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A smaller number of larger, more capable ships have the advantage of requiring fewer assets to be protected by escort vessels. Larger ships provide more comfortable accommodation, can transit more comfortably in higher sea states,

have a longer range and can operate a larger number of helicopters (six landing spots versus two for smaller ships). Operating two large ships versus four smaller ships is also likely to be somewhat cheaper.

But they also provide only the same number of docking spaces for landing craft as smaller ships. That means a larger number of smaller ships would have more surface lift overall than a smaller number of larger ships (up to twice as much). Individually larger ships are also higher value targets and if even one vessel is not available then the amphibious capability suffers a significant reduction (in this case 50%).

A greater number of smaller LPDs equipped with larger helicopters could arguably generate an equivalent helicopter capability to a LHD equipped with the smaller Blackhawk helicopter. The choice of the larger ship with greater number of helicopter spots is probably the only way that the Sikorsky S-70 Blackhawk can come close to meeting the Army’s two company simultaneous lift requirement as part of the AIR9000 competition for additional



LPA



Spanish LPD



Spanish LHD

The relative size of the 3 ships (see table p. 8)

troop lift helicopters. Due to its smaller size and lift capabilities you need to operate a larger number of Blackhawk helicopters at one time hence the need for the greatest number of operating spots. This would suggest that the choice of helicopter might be driving the type of amphibious ship to be acquired.

A smaller number of larger amphibious ships also decreases operational flexibility. The recent deployment of HMAS Manoora to the Solomon Islands lasted three months. Sending a 27,000 tonne helicopter carrier to do that task would have been a capability overkill. And it's debatable whether the ADF could afford to have 50% of its amphibious capability dedicated to what amounted to an ADF-supported operation (as opposed to a military operation). Finally operating smaller ships also gives you greater flexibility in being able to access a wider range of Australian and regional ports.

Army's Vision

The decision to purchase two larger ships—which represents more of an aviation-based amphibious capability—also seems to be somewhat inconsistent with the Chief of Army's vision for the future modernisation of the Australian Army, namely a “hardened

and networked” force. “Hardening” the Army involves greater armoured protection for our infantry force and acquiring new main battle tanks has been an important part of that initiative. But it's not the only one.

As recently as June 2004 the Chief of Army highlighted his plan to rationalise Army's holdings of armoured vehicles so that as many soldiers as possible are mounted in armoured vehicles. The intention is to move Army from a predominantly light infantry Army to a predominantly armoured protected Army. Getting heavy equipment ashore is one of the most critical issues facing the development of our amphibious capability. Only landing craft can effectively provide that capability. The number of landing craft you can deliver depends on the number of well-docks you have available. The number of well-docks you have available depends on how many ships you have. As noted above the larger ships operate the same number of landing craft as the smaller 12,000 ton ships (four in total for each ship).

Hence the decision to limit our amphibious capability to two large platforms—rather than 3–4 smaller ones—means we would have less capability (half as much) to deploy and sustain our land force once they become “hardened”.



A Landing Craft Utility (LCU) returns to the well-deck aboard the amphibious assault ship USS Belleau Wood. © US Navy

Mini aircraft carriers

One final point. Some media speculation has entertained the thought of these ships serving as “mini aircraft carriers”. The Joint Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade recently recommended that the government should consider purchasing some short take off/vertical landing (STOVL) versions of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) for the provision of organic air cover as part of regional operations. One recent media report indicated that ADF sources have confirmed that the RAAF is “at senior levels, investigating the feasibility of fielding STOVL JSFs for operation of the LHDs as required”.

The ships being considered by Defence certainly have that capability and with some modifications could undertake that role. The Spanish ship has a ski-jump (which enables short take-off) as part of its baseline design. It remains unknown whether the ski-jump will feature in the Australian ship should the Spanish design be chosen. But the Chief of Navy has said no consideration was being given to using these ships to operate fixed wing aircraft, such as the STOVL F-35. And it’s remains uncertain as to whether Air Force would actually support the purchase of any type of aircraft that would detract from their primary combat task, namely air combat and defence. Finally that version of the JSF remains the highest risk technically of the three types of aircraft currently under development hence its future remains somewhat more uncertain.

Sealift ship

The specifications of the sealift ship to be acquired remain unclear. The Minister said the form of that ship is not a decision that’s been taken to date and that a number of options are available. These would probably include commercial roll on/roll off ships (RO/RO) or high-speed catamarans such as the HMAS Jervis Bay used during the East Timor deployment and now being trialed in the US.

As it currently stands the project is to purchase a sealift capability, not an amphibious capability. In fact the decision to purchase a sealift ship rather than an amphibious ship

probably reflects the fact that after buying two large LHDs the remaining project money could only afford to purchase one ship built to commercial standards. If that is the case then it would be tantamount to attempting to buy an amphibious capability on the cheap. It’s just another reason why the government needs to decide whether it’s a smart idea to commit themselves to purchasing just two large amphibious ships at this stage to meet their overall capability requirements.

The type of ship that Defence ultimately acquires under Phase 4C has a huge bearing in determining our overall amphibious capability. However the decision on that ship isn’t expected before 2013 at the earliest. One of the dangers of waiting that long for a decision is that the experience of operating two large 27,000 ton amphibious ships means that Defence might be unwilling or incapable of purchasing a further ship for reasons of overall purchase cost, operating cost or personnel availability.

The original uncertainty as to the size and capability of the sealift ship may have been due to the rush for a June 2004 decision. The eighteen month delay gives the government the chance to firm up the capabilities of the follow-on purchase when it makes its decision on the amphibious ships. But rather than talk of purchasing a ship the government should be thinking about what sort of capability it requires, and it shouldn’t limit itself to just a sealift capability. Should the government insist on the purchase of the larger LHDs then it should also consider increasing the overall budget allocation for new amphibious capability to allow the purchase of at least two LSD amphibious ships rather than just one sealift ship.

Future Directions

The debate over determining the ADF’s future amphibious capability shouldn’t just be about choosing between larger and smaller ships. It may well be that some form of combination of the two is the optimum solution (though that would have to be assessed against the cost of operating two different classes of ships). What should be beyond argument, however, is that

our capability requirements cannot be satisfied by just two ships, no matter how large and capable they actually are.

The eighteen month delay in deciding the winning tender for the larger amphibious ships provides an opportunity for government to properly and thoroughly consider what sort of amphibious capability it really needs and wants, as well as whether Defence has currently allocated enough money to get what they promise the government.

The debate over determining the ADF's future amphibious capability shouldn't just be about choosing between larger and smaller ships.

It also provides Defence with the opportunity to take a more strategic and holistic approach in developing its amphibious capability. The project to acquire amphibious ships cannot be considered in isolation from the sealift ship project, it doesn't make sense to commit ourselves to the purchase of two large ships when we have no idea what the third ship will look like. By the same token the amphibious ship project also shouldn't be considered in isolation from the additional troop lift helicopter acquisition. It doesn't make sense to buy a ship based on its helicopter capabilities if we don't buy the right helicopter (ie the one with the better range/payload capabilities) for it.

Part of the problem is that no one really owns the ADF's amphibious capability, therefore no one organisation or group determines its capability development. Amphibious lift is shared between Army and Navy with the result that neither gives it the amount of attention it deserves. While this problem affects other projects in the DCP the interdependency of the many elements that come together to create an amphibious capability means that a single point of authority is essential. Once purchased, these ships will remain in service for at least

30–40 years, therefore they will provide the basis for the ADF's power projection capability over that time. This is just one of the DCP projects that's crying out for some strategic leadership, responsibility and control.

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About the Author

Aldo Borgu is ASPI's Program Director, Operations and Capability. He is responsible for the development, management and delivery of ASPI's policy research, projects and publications on the operational needs of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), the development of our defence capabilities, and the impact of new technology on our armed forces.

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