Game-changer in the Pacific: Surprising Options Open Up with the New Multi-purpose Maritime Capability

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Compelling reasons for developing and maintaining a robust amphibious force as part of the ADF's suite of military capabilities are not hard to find. They are based on sound liberal and realist imperatives for Australian leadership in the Pacific and beyond to foster and maintain regional security and stability. Experience after the Indian Ocean Tsunami and repeated deployments off the coast of Fiji is instructive, but so is Australia's experience dating back for a century, considered briefly in this article. That experience suggests a robust amphibious capability could make a significant difference to Australia's regional diplomatic leverage, providing relatively significant hard power to complement the government's diplomatic soft power in support of the nation's humanitarian, liberal-democratic and realist instincts.

Facing significant financial pressures, the Department of Defence is looking to make some hard decisions about capabilities that may be optional and which, some would argue, can be mothballed for now. One capability that may be under consideration is one or both of the new amphibious landing helicopter dock ships, or LHDs, being built jointly by BAE Systems Australia and Spain's Navantia. The first hull is now being fitted out near Melbourne and the second is under construction in Spain. On paper, the cutback option may appear attractive, with some critics questioning their justification, their utility, their protection, and the appropriateness of developing a Marine Corps-like amphibious capability for the army and navy.[1] But there are compelling reasons for not taking the axe to them.

In a time of increased political and strategic uncertainty and unprecedented environmental challenges, there are some benefits for Australia and the region that can be expected to accrue from properly developing, maintaining and resourcing the new amphibious capability. There is a range of other surprising instances where amphibious forces have demonstrated their utility in Australia's history. To fully understand the efficacy of such capabilities to Australia's defence and security, it is worth reflecting briefly on how amphibious forces have contributed to Australia's defence and security in the past, particularly during the world wars as well as in more recent decades.

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[1] G. Barker, 'Chest-beating Rights Come at a Price', *Australian Financial Review,* 8 March 2012, <http://www.afr.com/p/chest_beating_rights_come_at_price_ QItVTOhIsIprWWjS5m0fQP> [Accessed 3 December 2012].

Amphibious Forces and the World Wars

Gallipoli features as one of the touchstone moments in the formation of an Australian identity. Yet while American Marines closely study the Gallipoli campaign for operational lessons on amphibious operations, the Australian experience is one of mythologising the event rather than studying it for applicable lessons today. Closer to home, Australia's first major engagement in the First World War, undertaken by the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force, involved the seizure of the German colony based at Rabaul in what is now Papua New Guinea in September 1914. The incident was relatively painless and uneventful, but it pointed to the enduring utility of land and naval forces collaborating to enhance Australia's security in a region with thousands of islands.

During the Second World War Australians deployed troops ashore from ships in places like East Timor in 1942, Finschhaffen (on the coast of New Guinea) in 1943, and in Balikpapan, Borneo, in the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia) in 1945.[2] In naval folklore the pride of the fleet were the major fighting ships, including HMAS *Sydney* and HMAS *Australia*. But the ships most in demand were the 'ugly ducklings' of the fleet, the amphibious ships HMAS *Manoora*, HMAS *Kanimbla* and HMAS *Westralia*. They operated effectively in what could be called the 'twilight zone' known as the littorals. This was an area that, in some ways, was in between the areas traditionally dominated by land forces and naval forces—a domain that neither the army nor the navy appeared to be really comfortable with owning and mastering.

Post-War Hiatus

By the end of the war, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) had a fleet of six LSTs, able to project land forces at an unprecedented level. This capability would soon atrophy, with distracting commitments to the post-war occupation of Japan, followed by the Korean War, Malayan Emergency, and Confrontation in Borneo as well as the war in Vietnam—although HMAS *Sydney* and accompanying vessels played an important role in ferrying troops and equipment to and from Vietnam. In essence, however, during these years both the RAN and the Australian Army let lapse much of the amphibious capability which had proven to be in such great demand at the height of the campaigns in the South and South-West Pacific.

In the minds of many, amphibious operations came to be associated with the apparent excesses of the bloody fight against the Japanese across the Pacific. Little thought appears to have been given to the remarkable utility and versatility that accrued from maintaining a robust amphibious capability.

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[2] See P. Dean, *The Architect of Victory: The Military Career of Lieutenant-General Sir Frank Berryman* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

No one is seriously considering the recurrence of an event on this scale, nor does anyone envisage, even in the unlikely event of a major war, that Australia's modern-day amphibious vessels would be used for an Iwo Jima-like scenario of troops going ashore across a bullet-ridden beach. The advent of helicopters, satellite imagery and advanced intelligence, coupled with robust special forces capabilities, makes such scenarios a particularly remote prospect. But the images of places like Balikpapan were hard to shake from popular consciousness. Yet there would be numerous instances where land and naval forces worked together on unanticipated operations.

Consider for a moment Cyclone Tracy which struck Darwin on Christmas Eve 1974: one of the most useful platforms in the ADF's inventory to help out was the aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne*. With helicopters and stores embarked, the arrival of HMAS *Melbourne* in Darwin along with the escort maintenance ship HMAS *Stalwart* and a further eleven naval vessels made a significant material difference to the pace and extent of the recovery operations. The new LHDs offer considerably greater flexibility and capability than did the old carrier.

After Cyclone Tracy, HMAS *Melbourne* was decommissioned with the intention for it to be replaced in 1982. The decision to replace HMAS *Melbourne* was reversed after the British withdrew their offer of the aircraft carrier HMS *Invincible* once it proved so useful to the British during the 1982 Falklands War. Thankfully, the RAN had at least acquired an amphibious Landing Ship Tank (LST), HMAS *Tobruk* in 1981. Yet even then, little effort was made to reflect on the lessons from Britain's experience and to adjust Australia's force posture accordingly. HMAS *Tobruk* provided the Australian Defence Force with a modest amphibious lift capability, with a helicopter deck, but no command and control facilities for an embarked force. But beyond the ability to carry a helicopter on HMAS *Tobruk*, and on the navy's frigates, whatever air cover was required in Australia's immediate environs, strategic policy officers argued, could be provided for with land-based RAAF aircraft. While the LHD's are not intended to carry fixed wing aircraft, they will nevertheless be able to carry eleven helicopters and, if required unmanned aerial vehicles for intelligence and surveillance support. In effect they will be considerably more potent than the aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne* ever was.

Operation Morris Dance 1987

There is one operation undertaken shortly before the end of the Cold War, which took place in the Pacific and which illustrated some of the Australian Defence Force's (ADF) amphibious shortcomings and which pointed to areas requiring improvement. That was Operation Morris Dance.

The events of May 1987, when Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka and elements of the Royal Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) staged a military coup in

Suva served to illustrate the limits of Australian soft and hard power. Rabuka seized power in an attempt to secure traditional Fijian land ownership and to ensure that political power remained in the control of ethnic Fijians. The key government ministers managing the crisis in Australia, Prime Minister Bob Hawke, Defence Minister Kim Beazley and Acting Foreign Minister Senator Gareth Evans, initially wanted to see what they could do to rescue the deposed Fijian Prime Minister, Timoci Bavadra, with perhaps a helicopter sent in to accomplish a rescue. But the Chief of Defence Force, General Peter Gration, was consulted and he quickly and clearly explained the virtually insurmountable obstacles with such a proposal including the difficulty in locating the captive prime minister's exact whereabouts and the logistic difficulties in getting in and getting him out.[3]

Once it was clear that New Zealand was not interested in mounting a military operation, Hawke, Beazley and Evans quickly rejected military intervention. This was particularly the case once it became known early on that there was widespread support amongst Fijians for the coup.

Nonetheless, considerable planning was undertaken in Canberra, coupled with briefings from the Joint Intelligence Organisation, but it was not until 20 May 1987 that a warning order was issued for preparations to commence to support the potential evacuation of an estimated 4000 Australian nationals from Fiji. The Townsville-based Operational Deployment Force had been designated for response to contingencies that might arise in Australia's region.

The Advance Company Group was then flown by RAAF C-130 Hercules aircraft from Townsville to Norfolk Island and deployed in an ad-hoc fashion onboard a variety of Australian naval vessels; firstly the amphibious ship, HMAS *Tobruk* and subsequently the supply ship, HMAS *Success*, and the warships HMAS *Parramatta* and HMAS *Sydney.* None of these last three ships were intended for landing troops ashore. For fifteen days the troops stood by, spread out amongst the four ships, reviewing intelligence briefs and plans and conducting physical training in the ships off the Fijian coast, 2000 nautical miles from Australia. By 7 June the troops were back home.

The operation was, on one level, uneventful. But the operational concept for the deployment presumed the Fijian authorities would be prepared to facilitate the entry of Australian forces to extricate their evacuees. This planning relied on untested assumptions that could have exposed the force to significant difficulties beyond those they experienced. Indeed, General

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[3] This story features in J. Blaxland, *The Australian Army from Whitlam to Howard* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Gration "only saw the infantry company as evacuation marshals in a permissive environment. They were never going to contest with the RFMF."[4]

The operation off the coast of Fiji was never intended to test the limits of Australian military capabilities. But that fact was premised on the understanding that Australia simply did not have the capability to deploy sufficient force off the coast of Fiji to assert itself and influence the outcome in the event of a deteriorating security situation ashore.

Beyond any desire by the government to influence domestic political events in a South Pacific nation, the most fundamental issue relates to the ability of the Australian Government to protect its citizens overseas. Had the Fijian authorities refused to cooperate in the event of calls for an evacuation the only option left would be for the citizens to be abandoned or for a very large operation to be mounted against opposition. In the latter case, the Australians could have been used as hostages and, lacking a robust amphibious capability like the LHDs, the government would have been faced with being unable to do anything of substance to assist or rescue its citizens.

The experience of operating off the coast of Fiji in 1987, when juxtaposed against the strategic guidance in the 1987 Defence White Paper, symbolically illustrated the paradox of Australian governments emphasising defence of continental sovereignty while feeling compelled to deploy forces well beyond the air and sea approaches to the continent when unforeseen circumstances arose.

As a consequence, the experience would influence the key strategic planning document prepared in 1989 entitled *Australia's Strategic Planning in the 1990s*.[5] This document did not advocate a change of policy but recognised that situations might arise that could require the defence force to become involved in the South Pacific, including evacuation of citizens or natural disaster relief.[6]

Operation Morris Dance provided a sobering demonstration of the limits of Australian military power in the late 1980s. Even if it had wanted to or needed to, Australia simply could not have deployed a land force into the South Pacific safely and effectively if there was any prospect of onshore opposition to such a move. The LHDs are set to change the equation completely.

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Commonwealth of Australia, *Australia's Strategic Planning in the 1990s* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 1989)

[6] D. Horner, P. Londey and J. Bou (eds), *Australian Peacekeeping: Sixty Years in the Field* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 57.

Post-Cold War Operations

With the end of the Cold War, the tempo of ADF operational deployments increased markedly. In 1993, for instance, the 1 RAR Battalion Group deployed to Somalia employing HMAS *Tobruk* as the key support vessel. But being far away and not related to the direct defence of Australia, there were few lessons for the ADF that were thought to be worth learning from the experience—including concerning the utility of an expanded amphibious force.

Amphibious vessels were widely used for both missions to Bougainville in 1994 and again from late 1997 onwards. In 1994, for instance, HMAS *Tobruk* was loaded to capacity for the transit from Townsville to Bougainville. The experience demonstrated that the ADF would benefit from additional amphibious ships.

Subsequently two additional amphibious ships, HMAS *Manoora* and HMAS *Kanimbla*, were added to the inventory in 1994. Together with HMAS *Tobruk*, once they were refurbished, they became the most frequently-used ships in the fleet, reflecting their importance and utility in support of the government's priorities. But even then, their capacity was limited and they experienced considerable serviceability challenges.

More recently, experience in East Timor in 1999 and 2006 as well as in Aceh following the 2004 tsunami and other security and humanitarian challenges have prominently demonstrated the utility of an LHD-like capability.

In the case of the international intervention in East Timor in September 1999, the mission became heavily dependent on support vessels from our coalition partner even though Dili was close to a major Australian port in Darwin. Once again, the utility of amphibious vessels was demonstrated with the amphibious lodgment on East Timor's south coast, near the border with West Timor at Suai, in mid-October 1999. With the onset of the monsoon, the viability of the roads across the Timorese mountain range meant that a lodgment over the shore in Suai was necessary. Once again, the limited capacity of the ADF in this domain was stretched to capacity and thankfully supplemented by coalition partners. The return of ADF elements to East Timor, at short notice, in May 2006, reflected well on significant improvements to the ADF's amphibious capabilities.

In the meantime, Australia's amphibious forces played a pivotal role in enabling the establishment of the Regional Assistance Mission in the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in 2003. The physical presence of the landing platform amphibious ships had an intimidatory effect on those local bandits ashore running amok. The new LHDs are substantially larger and more capable than the Landing Platforms Amphibious, HMAS *Manoora* and HMAS *Kanimbla*, presenting a greater potential psychological impact on potential

adversaries ashore, while also facilitating far greater humanitarian assistance or disaster relief capabilities in times of need.

In addition, the tsunami relief operations in and around Aceh in early 2005 were facilitated by the availability of the ADF's amphibious forces. But, once again, the ADF was significantly constrained in what it could offer to assist in large part because of the limitations of the amphibious vessels at its disposal. Compared to the amphibious resources employed by other regional powers, Australia's amphibious capabilities were embarrassingly limited.

Return to the Waters off Fiji

Again, and also in 2006, following tensions in Fiji between the military and the government, three Australian naval vessels were deployed to international waters off Fiji in preparation for a potential evacuation of Australian citizens. Operation Quickstep was the name given to the ADF's operation in response to news of the military coup which occurred on 4 December 2006, admittedly with no bloodshed, when the RFMF, under Commodore Frank Bainimarama, took control of the Fijian Government. Like Operation Morris Dance in 1987, Operation Quickstep was only ever intended to provide for the permissive evacuation of Australian citizens and other approved foreign nationals in the event of an outbreak of violence following a military takeover in Fiji.[7]

While the coup was conducted non-violently, the deployment of forces, as in any peace-time military activity, always involves risk. On 29 November 2006 a Black Hawk helicopter crashed while attempting to land on the deck of one of the ships assigned to *Quickstep*, the amphibious ship HMAS *Kanimbla*. Nine of the ten crew and passengers were rescued, but two died. On 20 December the Australian Government announced that ADF elements involved in the operation were being recalled to Australia as the potential need for a military-backed evacuation appeared to have passed. But the experience demonstrated that the ADF was not yet configured for, nor fully trained for, the kinds of operations in the South Pacific that the government would task it to undertake.

Today two of the three ships, HMAS *Kanimbla* and HMAS *Manoora,* have been decommissioned, essentially because they were worn out. They proved to be remarkably useful and virtually indispensable platforms. Instead, the RAN of 2014 is set to commence operating an LHD alongside the recently-acquired Bay Class LST, HMAS *Choules.* Together they amount to a game changer for any future contingencies the ADF may face in the Pacific.

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[7] The author was Chief Staff Officer for Joint Intelligence (J2) at Headquarters Joint Operations Command during this period.

Ramifications for the LHDs

Strangely enough, the lessons on scale, force configuration and preparedness from the experience off the coast of Fiji appear to have been overlooked in some quarters as strategic planners consider how and why the new LHDs may be employed in the coming years.

These ships are incredibly versatile, being useful for a wide spectrum of tasks that include humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. These ships will enable the rapid deployment of considerable engineering, medical and other logistic elements to support rapid rehabilitation of devastated areas. Such aid and assistance has contributed significantly to the rebuilding of Australia's bilateral relationship with Indonesia and, in so doing, assisted in enhancing regional stability and security. With a greater tempo of natural disasters and man-made crises anticipated in the coming years, such a capability will prove distinctly beneficial.

At the other end of the spectrum, LHD's have sometimes been described as vulnerable for high-end warfighting, particularly against a submarine threat. But the LHDs were never purchased with the intention of operating on their own without protection from other vessels like the Air Warfare Destroyers (AWDs) and from the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), at least when close enough to land-based airfields. In addition, the LHDs offer a platform for a large number of on-board anti-submarine warfare (ASW) helicopters making them versatile not just for amphibious operations but also anti-submarine operations. Some have criticised the acquisition of air-warfare-focused AWDs as being too vulnerable to sub-surface attacks from submarines. But the danger is significantly mitigated by working alongside an LHD should there be several ASW helicopters embarked. So configured, an LHD would enhance the ASW defences that might be necessary if a submarine threat was to be faced by the AWDs.

In terms of ship-to-shore, the LHDs are suitable for conducting operations when invited to dock alongside in a harbour. Alternatively they are suitable for deploying equipment and personnel from a distance offshore by landing craft or by helicopter, particularly when docking facilities are damaged or destroyed by a natural disaster, or when uninvited. A critical looming shortcoming is the absence of clear plans to acquire a suite of landing craft to supplement the capability inherent in the LHDs and HMAS *Choules.*

Some have expressed concern that the LHDs will engender a cavalier willingness to fight a land war in Asia.[8] This is a remote prospect and, in a counter-intuitive manner, suggests that the Australian Government should avoid maintaining such capabilities in case it needs it. Besides, the lack of LHDs has not made a difference in such decisions in the past. For Australia,

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[8] Barker, 'Chest-beating rights come at a price'.

numerous military engagements have occurred in Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam, for instance (let alone more recently in Afghanistan), when no such amphibious capabilities were maintained in the Australian military inventory—although during the Vietnam War HMAS *Sydney* played an important supporting role as a troop carrier. Back then, Australia made niche contributions alongside great power allies, relying on others (Britain and the United States, primarily) for much of the necessary support.

But reliance on great and powerful friends to provide relevant amphibious capabilities seems increasingly inappropriate as uncertainty in the region increases and as demand for short-notice assistance grows in response to an increasing range of natural disaster and man-made crisis situations. There are compelling reasons, particularly for contingencies in the South Pacific and elsewhere nearby to Australia, to maintain a self-sufficient capability to reach and to influence events in places experiencing a crisis.

Nowadays, with sophisticated intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets, and robust helicopters, forces would deploy from ship to a relatively safe place onshore away from any highly defended positions, in an area most likely already reconnoitred and deemed safe by special forces. In addition, particularly if facing a sophisticated threat, the LHDs would deploy under the cover of the security umbrella provided by Australia's modern fighter aircraft, air warfare destroyers and submarines. It would be unreasonable to expect Australia to commit to deploying the LHDs in a hostile environment without such protection and surveillance assets deployed. While some decry the strategic planning process in defence that led to this mix of capabilities, the idea of maintaining a balanced force to mitigate a range of risks is actually wholly reasonable and sensible.

That reasonableness is reinforced when considering the deliberations of a number of Australia's neighbours. It is worth noting that several regional powers have also deemed reasonable the benefits of maintaining highly-capable amphibious assets. In addition to the United States, countries such as Japan, South Korea, France (with vessels in New Caledonia) and Russia have or are acquiring such platforms. Others such as Singapore, New Zealand and Thailand have also purchased modern amphibious ships for the same compelling reasons. These ships are sought after because they are versatile.

In addition, the Royal Australian Navy simply does not have the personnel to operate more than two or three such vessels. And smaller ones, while able to access more remote and smaller ports, would carry less and therefore provide less capability per platform. Besides, these ships are well on the way to being completed. Rather than turn back the clock and waste the good work and money invested, the government should consider how best these vessels can provide aid and other assistance in the region while furthering Australia's interests in fostering regional security and stability.

Australia's Defence White Paper in 2009 quite reasonably placed defence of Australia as the top priority.[9] And the Defence White Paper of 2013 stressed the importance of regional engagement and military diplomacy.[10] But there are competing priorities for the use of defence resources both within Australia and beyond in what is not just a 'sea-air gap' but a sea-air-land 'gap' (considering the many islands and platforms out there), where naval and army assets, supported by the RAAF, could be called upon to operate, at short notice, in a wide range of contingencies. The LHDs provide some of the most useful platforms for operating in and around Australia's vast coastline and beyond.

The contrast with the experience of the C-17 aircraft also is instructive. The Australian Government purchased four C-17s for the RAAF and within weeks, they were being used to deliver support after Cyclone Nargis in Burma in 2008 while also contributing significantly to the resupply of troops in Afghanistan. In other words, by acquiring a new capability the ADF was able to undertake tasks that simply could not have been contemplated previously. Similarly, with the imminent arrival of the LHDs as part of the ADF's suite of capabilities, it will be very interesting to watch and see just how many good reasons there will be for having acquired the capability.

Such capability should also be tied in closely with Australia's regional engagement and aid priorities. When US Navy LHDs cross South-East Asia and the Pacific on the way to the Persian Gulf, for instance, they routinely stop along the way and their navy-marine teams conduct focused humanitarian assistance missions in places like East Timor and Indonesia, earning immense goodwill while materially assisting the needy with construction, medical, dental and other support to local communities. These operations test a wide spectrum of military skills considered essential for complex warfighting, but which equally are valuable for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Implications for the Future

The Australian Army and the RAN should go and do likewise, focusing on projects mutually agreed with states in Australia's neighbourhood including Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, East Timor and a range of South Pacific countries. Engagement on strategically chosen development assistance projects could generate considerable goodwill towards Australia while bolstering the security and stability of the island states affected and, in turn, regional security for the states in Australia's neighbourhood. With the prospect of increased instability and environmental challenges, short notice calls for such assistance are more than likely.

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[9] Commonwealth of Australia, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030* (Canberra; Department of Defence, 2009).
[10] Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2013).

From now on, when considering response options in the face of a deteriorating security situation in Australia's region, a significantly more flexible and adaptable capability is available for use. Conversely, for those would-be over-throwers or trouble-makers in the South Pacific, the very existence of Australia's robust amphibious capability will act as a distinct deterrent in the knowledge that extreme action can be counteracted by a significant Australian joint force that could arrive off their shore at short notice.

In the meantime, as Australia looks to engage more closely with Indonesia and other ASEAN and South Pacific neighbours, constructive engagement with engineers, medical and logistic teams alongside local teams may well prove ground-breaking, literally and metaphorically. Such a capability is particularly significant when weighing up the security and stability calculus of the region and as the ADF reconfigures for life post-Afghanistan, a more useful and noble role would be hard to find.

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