

Expeditionary Ships

DISCUSSION

Combined with embarked Marines, naval expeditionary warships provide U.S. leaders with forward-presence and flexible crisis-response forces. They also provide the most formidable expeditionary forcible-entry capability in the world, the development and maintenance of which is the statutory responsibility of the Marine Corps, as directed by Title X of the U.S. Code.

Expeditionary lift requirements are formulated to support the national military strategy, satisfy combat surge demands, and meet day-to-day commitments. The total warfighting amphibious lift requirement for the Marine Corps is 3.0 Marine Expeditionary Brigade Assault Echelons (AE), which currently equates to 14 Amphibious Ready Groups. This remains a priority requirement. However, fiscal constraints have limited amphibious force structure to a programmatic goal of 12 ARGs capable of lifting 2.5 MEB AEs. Even this capability will not be achieved within the active amphibious ship force structure until the delivery of the twelfth *San Antonio* (LPD 17)-class landing assault ship in the 2014-2015 timeframe.

To fill the gap in the meantime, the Navy maintains amphibious stores ships (LKAs) and tank landing ships (LSTs) in a reduced operating status called the Amphibious Lift Enhancement Plan (ALEP). This shortfall in active amphibious ships remains an area of concern, and makes the expeditious completion of the 12-ship LPD 17 program – providing air-capable, LCAC-capable, wet-well ships optimized to meet USMC warfighting requirements – even more essential.

Large-deck amphibious assault ships, the centerpieces of ARGs/ESGs and other expeditionary task forces, are likewise essential to



maintaining amphibious lift and power-projection capabilities. Currently, there are 12 large-deck ships (seven *Wasp*-class LHDs and five *Tarawa*-class LHAs) in service. Congress has directed the construction of an eighth *Wasp*-class multi-purpose amphibious assault ship (LHD), now designated LHD 8. The construction contract was awarded in April 2002 and the ship will be delivered in FY 2007. LHD 8 will be similar to LHD 1-7 but will be powered by gas turbine engines and have all-electric auxiliaries. Upon commissioning LHD 8, the Navy will retire one of the five *Tarawa*-Class LHAs.

MARINE CORPS POSITION

The Marine Corps must remain capable of rapidly and decisively deterring or defeating adversaries who try to impose their will on the United States or its allies. A fiscally constrained programmatic goal of 12 Amphibious Ready Groups – one that deliberately accepts increased operational risk by attempting to balance force structure with available resources – does not change the warfighting requirement to lift the Assault Echelons of three Marine Expeditionary Brigades via amphibious shipping.