



74th Group Army Conducts Mobilization Exercise with Roll-on Roll-off Ships

OE Watch Commentary: In early June, elements of a heavy combined arms brigade [重合成旅] completed an exercise involving loading a civilian Roll-on, Roll-off ship (Ro-Ro). The accompanying excerpt is a partial transcript from a television report on the exercise.

The ship involved in the exercise, the Changdalong [长达隆], is a 20,000-ton car carrier. It is 140.5 m long and 24.4m wide, has 8 decks and can typically accommodate 2,000 cars. Homeported in Shenzhen, the Changdalong and its sister ship are operated by Sinotrans&CSC [中国外运长航集团], China's largest logistics company. In 2017 SinoTrans offered the ships for use by the PLA, which agreed to subsidize them and pay for refitting to make them adequate for military use.

Recent Chinese laws have sought to formalize the responsibilities for civilian transport companies support for the PLA. Previous Chinese media reporting on exercises involving the Changdalong, for example, cited the *National Defense Transport Law* [中华人民共和国国防交通法] (2016) which, in Article 36 notes that "The state, with large and medium-size transportation enterprises as the main support, organizes and builds strategic delivery support forces...Enterprises that undertake strategic delivery support tasks are responsible for organizing personnel and equipment...Carrying out necessary training and exercises and improving their ability to carry out strategic delivery tasks."

Over the past few years, the PLA has adopted a combined arms brigade model across most of the force, with light, medium and heavy brigades with varying equipment types. Video of the exercise depicted Type 96 main battle tanks, Type 63 APCs and Type 86G infantry fighting vehicles being loaded. As noted in the excerpt below, even in a massive ship, the size and weight of the vehicles poses many challenges in terms of maintaining communication between the loading crew and vehicle drivers and keeping the ship balanced.

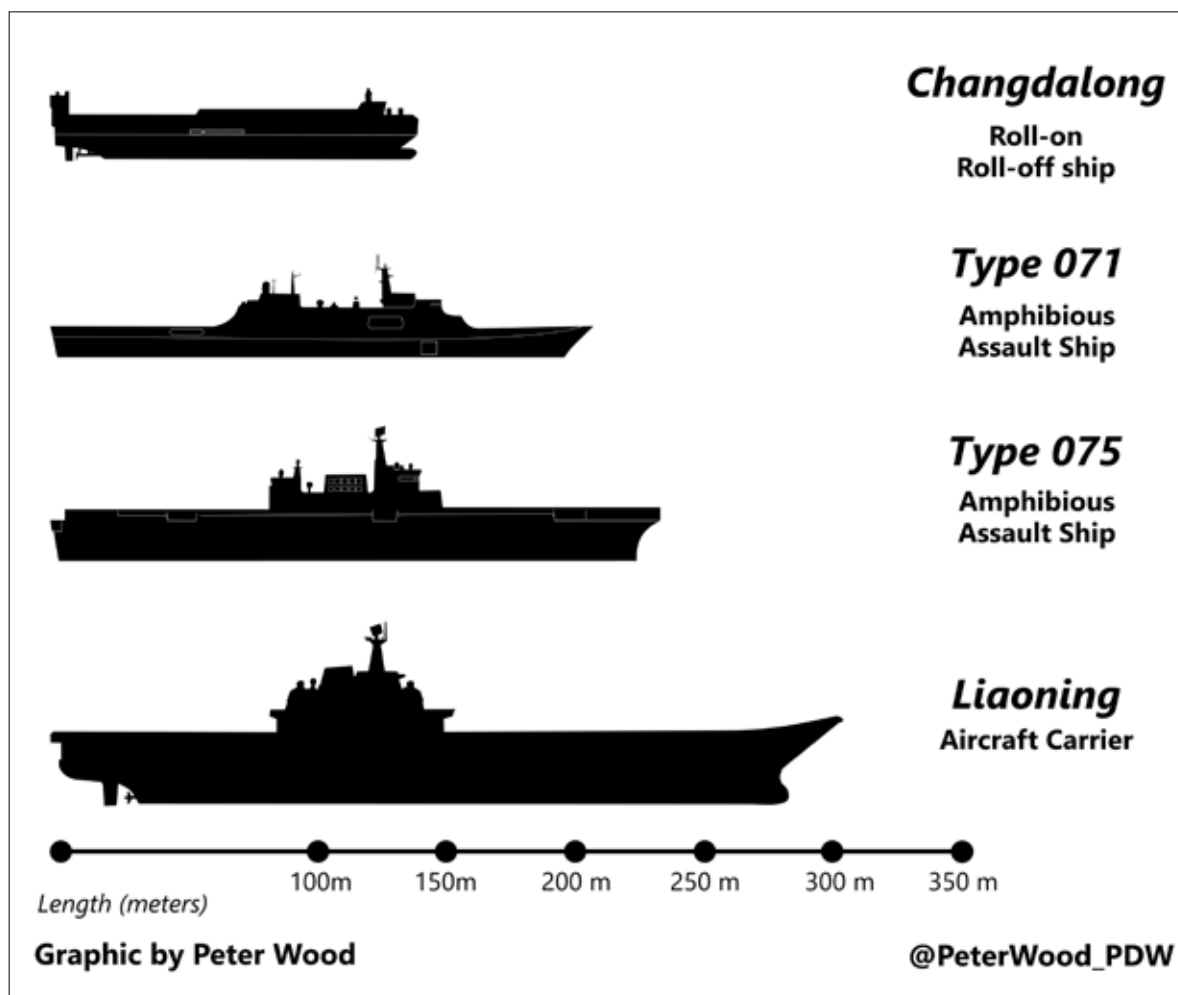
Additional reporting on the exercise noted that the civilian crew not only worked with the PLA unit on embarkation and disembarkation procedures but also tested damage control while at sea.

This unit has reportedly conducted ten such exercises in the past few years, reflecting the importance of this particular mission. The heavy combined arms brigade is subordinate to the 74th Group Army headquartered in Huizhou [惠州], Guangdong province. It falls under the Southern Theater Command, with responsibility for protecting Chinese interests in the South China Sea and projecting power in that theater during a conflict. It would also play a role in any contingency involving Taiwan.

Public analyses of a conflict between Taiwan and the mainland envision a massive shift of military equipment across the Strait, making amphibious and transportation exercises such as this one an important part of preparation for that contingency. While the Changdalong has significant carrying capacity, it should be noted that it is limited by its requirement for having adequate dock facilities to offload vehicles. Other ships such as the Type 071 or Type 075 amphibious assault ships (see graphic below) have well-decks that allow direct deployment of amphibious vehicles.

A more likely scenario is that the ships will be used to transport vehicles to Chinese bases overseas such as the one in Djibouti, which hosts a contingent of troops from the PLA Navy Marine Corps.

In recent years the PLA has expanded the scope of its logistics exercises, holding its largest ever for example in 2018. While the Changdalong itself is only one component of the sealift capacity the PLA is developing, these are technically complex exercises of capabilities that the PLA needs and their frequency and realism appears to be increasing. **End OE Watch Commentary (Wood)**





Continued: 74th Group Army Conducts Mobilization Exercise with Roll-on Roll-off Ships

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-- Fu Huaguo [付华国], deputy chief of staff in an unidentified brigade of the 74th Group Army

Source: “军地联合 完成重装跨海投送 (Military Civil Cooperative Operation: Sea Lift of Heavy Equipment),” *Morning Report on Defense* [国防军事早报], 7 June 2020. http://www.js7tv.cn/video/202006_219448.html

Narrator: At the port, dozens of tanks and other military equipment are ready to be loaded in accordance with the loading plan. During loading, the tank needs to enter the ship's hold by reversing, which requires the pilot to operate strictly in accordance with the command of the guiding team. If you are a little careless, there is a risk of an accident.

Tang Geyong [唐鸽勇], one of the guides for the tanks: “Due to the width of our tank and the narrowness of the aisles, the drivers have very limited lines of sight. When the tank enters the ship's hold it gets really loud.”

Narrator: In order to improve the loading efficiency, the vehicles are pre-positioned according to the capacity of each deck. Various types of heavy equipment are loaded in sequence.

Jin Chengwei [金成伟] Captain of the Changdalong: “When loading we have to pay attention to the balance of the ship because these armored vehicles are relatively heavy. When bringing them aboard we have to distribute them on both sides as much as possible, since loading a single side could cause the ship to list, which is dangerous.”

Narrator: At sea, the wind and waves make the ship rock 20-30 degrees. In order to ensure the safety of the cabin equipment during the voyage, before the ship offshore, officers and soldiers to tie down and reinforce all equipment.

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Narrator: The brigade also organized navigational adaptation training, contingency training, etc., to ensure that heavy equipment transport is more efficient and safer.

Fu Huaguo [付华国], deputy chief of staff in an unidentified brigade of the 74th Group Army noted: “Through this civilian ship loading and unloading test drill, commanders at all levels have mastered the organization procedures and methods for using civilian transport ships, created standard loading and unloading procedures for a heavy combined arms brigade to use civilian ships, and laying a solid foundation for our participation in a joint exercise”