



New Class of Amphibious Assault Ship Will Expand PLA Navy Operational Capability

OE Watch Commentary: Chinese news sources, backed up by commercial satellite imagery, are reporting that work on a new class of ship—the Type 075 amphibious assault ship [075型两栖攻击舰]—is already underway at Hudong Shipyard [沪东造船厂] in Shanghai. When complete, the ship will join the expanding number of the more capable Type 071 (Yuzhao) class amphibious transport docks built since 2007. An article in *Shipborne Weapons*, a popular magazine published by China State Shipbuilding Corporation, speculates that when complete, it will fill an important niche for the PLA Navy.

The article notes that while China has successively improved its earlier amphibious ships, such as the Type 072A landing ship, they remain ineffective due to their inability to support large scale aerial operations. While the Type 072A (Yuting II) has a landing deck—and the PLA has even practiced flying attack helicopters off the back of one—it lacks a hanger bay or support facilities. Additionally, this type is limited by its small size. By comparison, the Type 071 amphibious transport dock has a displacement more than five times larger, with a spacious deck and hanger. However, the article goes on to note that while significantly more capable, limitations of range and firepower mean that, even in conjunction with land-based aircraft, the Type 071s are still not fully capable of supporting PLA amphibious assault operations beyond China's near seas [近海].

Descriptions of Chinese campaigns published by the National Defense University in Beijing emphasize using multiple modes of transport to “accelerate the speed of first wave units” landing; including fast landing craft, hovercraft, and helicopters executing vertical assaults as part of three-dimensional landing operations [立体登陆作战].

The article goes on to suggest that the Chinese Navy must either double down on developing carrier battle groups or build large helicopter-carrying amphibious assault ships on par with US landing helicopter docks (LHD). For the moment China lacks shipborne aircraft capable of vertical or short takeoff and landing, limiting the new class of ships to carrying a large complement of transport and attack helicopters. If expanded to include additional Type 075s, China's ambitious ongoing carrier building program may suggest that it has chosen both paths. (Also see: “The Future of the PLA Navy's Shipborne Helicopter Force” in this issue of *OE Watch*.) **End OE Watch Commentary (Wood)**

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Source: “中国海军两栖攻击舰的需求 (Requirements for the PLA Navy's Amphibious Assault Ship),” *Shipborne Weapons* [舰载武器] No. 307. February 2019. pp. 16-18.

As early as 2010, there was news that the Chinese navy was building an amphibious assault ship. This was roughly three years after China's first 20,000-ton Type 071 assault ship had been delivered. These high-tonnage amphibious ships with large deck-wells and helicopter decks represent a major leap for Chinese naval ship development. Previous Chinese naval development followed traditional mechanized amphibious ships. Even the best of those types at the time, the Type 072A (Yuting II) Tank Landing ship only had a gross tonnage of less than 5000 tons and under normal circumstances could only carry less than 400 tons (250 personnel and 10 light tanks). Although in theory, it can carry 1500 tons, in realistic operations there is not enough room for more than 1000 tons of materials. Although the first equipped with a landing deck for helicopters, the ship did not have necessary support equipment, giving it limited ability to operate helicopters. As a result, the Type 072A is a very traditional conventional landing ship.

The 20,000-ton Type 071 dock landing ship has a larger vehicle storage area (and can carry up to 40 vehicles of all kinds) crew compartment (up to 800 marines). The ship itself has improved capabilities including aviation support facilities and the world's largest well deck. Aviation facilities including a 70m helicopter landing deck and a hanger that can hold 4 Z-8J [large transport helicopters]. The well deck can carry four Type 726 (Yuyi class) LCACs or 18 Type 05 high-speed amphibious fighting vehicles....

The Type 071 amphibious transport dock gives the Chinese navy a basic capability for carrying out three-dimensional landing operations within near seas areas (this is based on the limitations of land-based aviation units' combat radii or land-based army aviation helicopter's operational range). But increasing the number of Type 071s does not resolve the issue that some regions are beyond the range of land-based aircraft's ability to cover or for the (Type 071s) shipborne helicopters ability to successfully support three-dimensional landing operations. China's Navy must completely resolve the question by following one of two courses: Develop their own aircraft carrier battle groups, or develop their own amphibious assault ships....

According to domestic speculation, China is currently building a 30,000-ton class large amphibious assault ship. The overall design resembles the U.S. “Wasp” class (LHD), and the vehicle storage area and well deck are not large, with more space used for the hanger bay and various aviation support equipment. Due to the fact that China does not currently have shipborne vertical or short takeoff and landing (V/STOL) aircraft like the AV-8B or F-35B, it will first equip helicopters. The standard for 30,000-ton class amphibious assault ships is roughly 20 aircraft, and 30 tons under full load.

Due to the insufficient numbers of aircraft carriers and shipborne fixed-wing aircraft, a Chinese assault ship could carry slightly more shipborne armed helicopters than their U.S. equivalents (estimated no less than 1/3 of the total compliment). Under full load, the ship could boast a very impressive 20 10-ton transport helicopters at the same time. If used as part of a formation [编队] with two Type 071 amphibious transport docks, the entire amphibious assault operational formation would have 28 transport helicopters (including four aboard each of the Type 071s) and roughly 10 armed helicopters to send into battle.

This way, during Chinese navy's three-dimensional amphibious operations, the air component and surface transport components are balanced, improving operational equipment and material transport capability or reducing the time to move ashore (decreasing the amount of time spent within range of the enemy), all with great significance.