

IMDEX 2013: US Navy looks to prove the worth of LCS

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As the first of the US Navy's new Littoral Combat Ship (LCS), USS Freedom, docks off the shore of Singapore, the long-running debate surrounding the worth of the vessel continues to play out.

Its presence in the Asia-Pacific characterises the overall effort by the US to rebalance a 60/40 split in its naval presence in favour of Asia, as put forward by Leon Panetta when he was secretary of state for defence.

The LCS was brought into South East Asia on 18 April to embark on an eight month deployment of the region, and it is still unclear how much of a diplomatic presence it will have in the region.

'The headline politics of the deployment will very much be cast in the context of the US rebalancing pivot,' Euan Graham, senior fellow, maritime security programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies told *Shephard*.

'In a way it's putting flesh on those bones. From a diplomatic perspective it's a way of the US demonstrating presence.'

Graham said he thinks the platform will be deployed in a diplomatic sense in the first six months, but it will also give a better idea of what its capabilities are with South East Asia as the theatre in mind.

'I think from a diplomatic perspective, it's the right capability in that it's not an aircraft carrier battle group, which would send the obvious message of balancing with a big stick and likely to get a strong reaction from China,' he explained.

The choice of vessel was believed to bring a speedy, modular, easily deployed capability, although the success of this has not yet been determined because it has not yet operationally been deployed.

Three modular mission packages will eventually be available for the vessel: surface warfare, ASW and mine countermeasures.

Two primes are currently under contract to build different design hulls, the Lockheed Martin monohull Freedom class and the Austal trimaran Independence class. USS Freedom was commissioned in 2008, while USS Independence was commissioned on 2010.

'It's yet to be put to the test so I think that is obviously still a risk in that it hasn't been operationally deployed before, and you have a lot of unknowns with two parallel basic sea frames for the LCS with radical differences between them,' Graham continued.

'So making sure the modularity actually works between these two platforms is actually a harder challenge in some ways because they've been designed by different companies to different design standards.'

He argued it will be unclear for some time as to whether or not the two designs work in parallel, because the trimaran design is developmentally behind the monohull USS Freedom.

It has also been reported that the navy has two years to finalise the programme's intentions. Currently 24 vessels are on contract – 14 in each category- with 28 more planned. The last four are expected to be requested for Pentagon's fiscal year 2015, after which the future of the uncontracted vessels are undetermined.

Bob Nugent, VP of advisory services at AMI International, argued that the ships add worth through their use of unmanned vehicles.

'I think the fundamental thing that LCS got right is embracing the need for a platform that is specialised for unmanned vehicles,' he told *Shephard*. 'No other ship in the navy has been designed from the beginning with the use of those platforms in mind.'

He said that this element of design has led to negative press because of delays in delivering the mission packages with unmanned systems in them.

'But ultimately when we deliver those mission packages and put them together with LCS, I think that will be a significant step forward in the state of knowledge,' he added.

The decision to develop two different frames also goes back in history, he said, as older aircraft carriers and submarines used to be developed in large and small variants before settling at a standardised size.

'If there is any criticism with the LCS in its current configuration is that there is a bit of a compromise between a lot of different and conflicting forces, and [the ships] were smaller to begin with,' he added. 'But the fact that they are larger does actually make them better as host platforms for unmanned systems.'

Meanwhile, Lockheed Martin, the prime contractor on the Freedom programme, said that it is proud of the deployment to the region, and the third vessel in the class is currently going through final customer trials.

Customers in the Asia-Pacific in particular do not have requirements for a system the size of the LCS, so a smaller variant may be more appealing, so it is also offering the Multi-Mission Combat Ship (MCS) - a scaled down LCS - for export.

Helicopters and UAVs can be launched from the MCS and the company is looking at vessels with a 40-110 crew, depending on requirements.