

A Controversial US Warship to Singapore



Written by Gavin Greenwood

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'Crappy' boat or revolutionary new naval weapon?

In the next day or so a sleek, futuristic warship painted in newly-applied grey and black 'dazzle' camouflage will push off from a naval dock in San Diego, California, at the start of a voyage that will end in Singapore in about a month.

The *USS Freedom*, the first of the US Navy's controversial Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) to be sent to Asia, is a new class of warship intended - as its name suggests - to operate on the ocean's margins rather in the blue open waters traditionally favored by naval strategists and commanders. The tri-hulled catamaran *USS Independence* and two other LCSs are also due to be sent to Singapore over the next four years.



Ahoy there

While the arrival of *Freedom* at Singapore's Changi naval base for an eight-month 'deployment' will have no direct impact on naval dispositions or power within the Asia-Pacific region, it is set to serve a wider purpose for the US Navy.

Freedom's formal mission includes conducting "maritime security operations, participat[ing] in international exhibitions and exercises to highlight US strategic intent in the region." However, the less advertised purpose of the vessel's time in Singapore is seen as running the technically troubled warship through its paces as far away as possible from the LCS program's numerous critics within the navy and defence establishment.

LCS supporters will also hope the warship's presence in an albeit ill-defined quasi-operational role will produce a positive public relations buzz around the vessel and the wider program. This latter point is evident from the decision to paint *Freedom* in a camouflage pattern not used on a major US Navy warship since the Second World War. The 'dazzle' pattern paint job is in essence naval theater as it has no practical military use in the age of anti-ship missiles, autonomous homing torpedoes and intelligent mines. Instead it appears an attempt to enhance *Freedom's* mystique, while also concealing the dark smudges along the hull from the vessel's engine flues.

'Revolution' or a 'Little Crappy Ship?'

Many observers, not least within the US Navy and defence industry, will monitor and analyze *Freedom's* progress in minute detail. The LCS program has stirred a decade-long controversy within the navy as to whether it represents a coherent strategic and doctrinal response to the altered needs and priorities of US sea power, or if it merely reflects the need to cut operational and manning costs while maintaining the appearance of a global oceanic presence.

Theory, recent experience against Iranian small boat 'swarm' tactics and economics seem to have to a greater influence dictated the LCS design and purpose than strategic assessment, doctrine or longer-term threat assessments. For at least some of the program's detractors the LCS acronym has, among many other variants, been reworked as 'Little Crappy Ship.'

A total of 52 LCS are now due to be built, reduced in early 2013 from 55, at an estimated cost more than US\$25 billion (without weapons systems) and representing around 18 percent of the navy's planned 306-ship fleet by 2030. However, this total may well be further reduced if the present budget 'sequestration' exercise continues to erode US defense spending over the coming years.

LCS's are relatively small, lightly armed, multi-role, helicopter-equipped vessels requiring a far smaller crew - between 40 and 50 core personnel depending on role - than the conventional frigates and mine warfare ships they are intended to replace. The LCS concept is based around an ability to change the ship's mission by quickly installing modular packages to enable the vessel to variously conduct surface warfare, anti-submarine, counter-mine and special forces tasks. However, integrating these systems and providing crews trained in the differing specialised operations has been a major

problem for the LCS program and the navy.

While *Freedom* is a steel mono-hulled ship capable of reaching speeds of up to 40 knots, the equally fast tri-hulled *Independence* is built almost entirely of aluminium, an unusual design choice for a warship due to concerns that the metal fails to provide adequate protection, is susceptible to corrosion and may even burn or melt in a fire.

There is official recognition the LCS would not survive combat against modern conventional naval forces, leaving their primary fighting role to countering insurgents or pirates. The navy's official response is that the LCS project remains a work in progress, and by extension *Freedom's* deployment is part of this process rather than adding to US naval strength in the Asia Pacific.

If the US Navy's interest in testing the LCS in Southeast Asia seems clear, any advantage to Singapore appears less so when set against the potential diplomatic cost in terms of the country's relationships with nations often wary about its close ties with Western powers. This applies notably to China, where concerns over US 'encirclement' have raised the tempo of nationalist rhetoric - particularly within the powerful military.

Baseless speculation

The US government's intention to send up to four LCS to Singapore was announced by then US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in early June 2011. Both Singapore and the US emphasized that the warships' presence at Changi didn't amount to a formal basing agreement, a diplomatic nicety that may have been privately dismissed by close neighbors and China.

Despite hosting a US Navy logistics unit - the 100-strong COMLOG WESTPAC - at the Changi naval base since the closure of the Subic Bay facility in the Philippines in the early 1990s to provision and maintain passing US warships, Singapore's sensitivity over insisting the LCS' presence be viewed as temporary arrangement may reflect concerns over China's growing emphasis on defining and defending maritime territorial claims.

Since the planned LCS deployment was announced in mid-2011, Beijing's willingness to reveal its intention to dominate what it considers its territorial waters based on self-defined boundaries in the South China and East China seas has intensified to the point where a clash between Chinese naval units and those of Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines has moved from unthinkable to plausible.

Singapore's foreign policy has long been based on balancing its relationships between regional neighbors and global powers through a mixture of economic and military ties. Investment, and the willingness to serve as a receptor for often opaquely sourced funds, has helped ease frictions among large and potentially threatening neighbors. This policy has been backed by the creation of the most lavishly equipped military forces in Southeast Asia.

Ties with Beijing are supported by massive investment, while location keeps Singapore out of the immediate area of contention in the South China Sea. Relations with the US, on the other hand, have increasingly been characterised by military and defense links. Singapore has purchased high-end US military equipment for many years, mainly for its powerful air force.

The Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) operates F-15SG Eagle and F-16C/D Fighting Falcon fighter aircraft, AH-64D Apache attack helicopters, CH-47 Chinook heavy lift helicopters and KC-135R Stratotankers for in-flight refuelling. RSAF personnel undergo extensive flight and support training in bases across the US, notably in Arizona, Idaho and Texas, and Singapore has also offered consistent if modest support to US-led operations in Afghanistan by providing medical personnel, drone and mortar detecting units and training teams.

Port in a storm

Singapore has no doubt weighed the risks and rewards of hosting the LCS and probably assessed that the presence of warships that are either testbeds or de facto naval avatars - a strategically non-threatening manifestation of US naval power - will not destabilise regional ties or unduly concern Beijing.

However, what may prove more contentious is how Singapore extracts itself from the LCS arrangement if ties between China and the US deteriorate. While the present deal appears limited to Singapore 'hosting' the warships over eight- to ten-month periods at a time the overall agreement appears to extend at least until 2017.

Any change in the naval atmospherics in the region over this period, as seems almost certain given China's recent actions and rapidly expanding warship construction program, may well lead Washington to request a more permanent presence for an LCS squadron and perhaps other vessels. Any such move, however, would place Singapore in a potentially untenable position. To accede to such a request would draw China's ire - and perhaps that of Malaysia and Indonesia as well - while to deny the US access or support would threaten long-term ties with Washington. The presence and fate of warships throughout history have often proved catalysts in triggering or signalling events far greater than the sum of the vessels size or military significance. The loss of the *USS Maine* in Havana in 1898 led directly to the US Navy presence in Southeast Asia waters, while the arrival of the German gunboat *Panther* in Morocco's Agadir harbor in 1911 helped push

Europe towards war three years later.

The de facto presence of US Navy warships in Singapore on a permanent basis over the coming four years, regardless of the vessels' capabilities and how the administrative details are presented, is set to mark a shift in how Washington's and Singapore's relationship may be perceived by other powers. How such perceptions are managed will prove a key challenge, particularly for Singapore, over the coming years.

* Asia Sentinel inadvertently selected the wrong picture of USS Freedom. We apologize for the error -- eds. (*Gavin Greenwood is senior analyst with the Hong Kong-based Allan & Associates political and security risk management consultancy.*)


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Business Development Director

written by Anthony1223, February 28, 2013



Singapore a typical parasite who need China market and factories for its economic development and need US military protection from CHINA invasion??? Do you think China will invade Singapore ??? Everybody will think it must be JOKING !! In fact Singapore just want to show other ASEAN countries that Singapore is BUDDY BUDDY with both CHINA AND AMERICA ? Being under the rule of British empire it show the Singapore's heavy slave mentality.

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