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Boost For Sea-Basing Concept

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The US military's burgeoning sea-basing concept is gaining support and momentum, senior US defence officials said last week. Its endorsement by an influential Department of Defense advisory panel is expected soon.

Within a few months, the Defense Science Board will release a study on sea-basing that endorses the concept, said Paris Genalis, director of Naval Warfare in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). One reason for the growing support, Arthur Cebrowski, director of OSD's Office of Force Transformation told Jane's Defence Weekly, is that "people are coming to grips with the fact that longer ranges and higher speeds are important".

The study will find that "fast sealift is going to be a key component of sea basing" Genalis added, noting that investment will be needed to develop technologies capable of allowing large loads of 20 tonnes or more to be moved from ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore.

While the sea-basing concept is gaining acceptance at the Pentagon, what it will ultimately look like is far from decided, senior navy and defence officials said. They noted that there are two competing ideas for the sea-bases - one that would use a few very large platforms similar to the Mobile Offshore Base (MOB) concept, and the other that would utilise many smaller ships capable of providing a base when working together. Although the officials said that ultimately a mixture of both may be fielded, present accompanying warfighting concepts tend to favour numerous smaller ships over a few larger ones, Cebrowski said.

Ideas for the MOB, now called the Mobile Logistics Platform, range from modular runway sections on barge-like platforms that can be assembled at sea, to oil-rig derivatives such as the US Marine Corps' Seabased Expeditionary Augmentation Platform concept. The navy's programme executive officer for ships Rear Adm Charles Hamilton noted that responsibility for MOB technologies may be moved to his office "shortly".

Whatever platforms are chosen, Cebrowski added, they will need to be able to sustain round-the-clock operations, disperse and regroup quickly, and have a high degree of mobility at both the operational and tactical level. They would also have to be designed to operate seamlessly within the military's larger transportation system and be able to support new vertical manoeuvre warfighting concepts.

That, he said, could ultimately lead to building at least some of the very large vessels capable of accommodating intra-theatre transport aircraft. Concepts for those aircraft include very large lighter-than-air vehicles capable of carrying 500-1,000 tonnes of cargo, as well as super short take-off and landing aircraft such as Boeing's Advanced Theatre Transport.

Moreover, Cebrowski said, some of the lift needs could be met by high-speed vessels, variants of which could deliver goods directly from the continental US if technology is developed to allow it to refuel at sea. Ideally, the US would like to be able to resupply the sea-base directly from the continental US, said Maj Gen James Battaglini, the navy's Director of Expeditionary Warfare. The concept's feasibility has not been determined, he added.

To test the sea-basing and similar concepts, the US Marine Corps and US Navy will conduct the Sea Viking 2004 experiment in October-November next year, said Brig Gen Robert Schmidle, Director of the Expeditionary Force Development Center, Marine Corps Combat Development Command. Sea Viking is the first experiment intended to help the marines make their Ship-to-Objective Manoeuvre warfighting concept a reality.