

The 'Domesday book' of the world's military might was refreshed at the launch of the International Institute for Strategic Studies' "Military Balance" for 2014. Nick Watts and Len Barnett were there for Defence Viewpoints. First Nick : This authoritative volume outlines both the numbers of equipment held by nations, as well as identifying discernible trends in defence expenditure and policy.

Of note since the publication of the last edition were developments in the Middle East, notably Syria and Iran. This period covered the reported chemical weapons attack by Syrian forces. Developments in West and Central Africa, including the Mali operation by France. Tensions in Asia, which centred on the establishment of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, by China.

What emerges is the increasing levels of defence expenditure in Asia, as against declining levels of expenditure in the 'West'. This was a trend identified in last year's edition. There seemed to be a consensus that increased expenditure on its own does not directly translate into military power. This is a function of political will and intent. Thus as the western Allies contemplate the end of operations in Afghanistan, the political will of their governments to consider future undertakings may be constrained by war weariness. This was evident last summer when British MPs refused to give their prime minister a mandate for a strike against Syria.

Meanwhile the Mind-set of the Chinese or Iranian leadership remains as opaque as ever. Military thinkers usually consider capabilities and intentions when trying to calculate the course of action by a particular country. But this calculation is complicated when dealing with authoritarian or closed regimes. Similarly where there are proxy groups and militias backed by different countries or factions, calculations become even more complicated.

The paradox therefore is that the West seeks reassurance from increasingly sophisticated and capable weapons and systems, while the principal threat seems to derive from agile militias, or self-starters, who do not fear the consequences of these weapons. While conventional military forces contemplate defence diplomacy and 'upstream engagement' to avoid destabilising conflicts, the current threat seems remote in the minds of western public opinion.

Meanwhile in Asia long running disputes rumble away. The Chinese and the Indian navies are bringing new aircraft carriers into service. The Gulf emirates arm themselves against what they regard as an Iranian threat. Bands of Islamist brigands roam the Sahel and North Africa. The centenary of the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 offers many historic lessons. The NATO summit in Wales in the autumn will no doubt draw parallels between the tinder box world of interlocking alliances in 1914, and the situation today. It must be hoped that there are no surprises in August!

Len Barnett, a freelance maritime researcher, took a sideways look at the methodology

As an open source guide to current conventional military balances and defence spending, with analysis on trends, this should be an invaluable starting point for many people involved in differing sectors; from those in executive positions (wishing to check detail); all the way through to analysts; as well as journalists; and others. Nevertheless, as highlighted in the question and answer session during the press launch, this can be seen as very 'First-world' orientated. Therefore, for any organisations, or individuals making sophisticated studies, recourse to other sources with other perspectives may be beneficial in gaining further understandings of balances of power, not just strictly in military hardware, but also in cultural and other terms. After all, whether through the threat of violence, or its physical execution, it is not often that war is 'total': even as normally now understood, never mind in the strictly Clausewitzian sense. In other words, wars are normally 'limited' and nation states engage in these for specific reasons, even if they are not necessarily particularly rational. So, while military balances on paper are important, myriad human complexities not infrequently render these less so.

In my opinion as a technical publication, unfortunately, there are inherent weaknesses though. Known faults in weapons-systems and/or delivery systems are not mentioned. These might be regarded as inconvenient for governments and their administrative arms. However, for those at the sharp end, these defects can range from being merely annoying, to downright fatal. Therefore, I would argue that it is incumbent on those dealing in balances of military power to take these into consideration. Allied to this is might be information on the operational deployment of such equipment, where publically known, rather than just its existence. Similarly, space on maintenance regimes, especially for 'large ticket items', such as warships, might be given. For example, having four missile-carrying submarines does not necessarily mean more than two in operation at any one time: at least after the first major refit.

Ending on a positive note, however, it might also be worth mentioning that although an annual, as an historian, I can see 'The Military Balance' as a very worthwhile reference work long after its designed shelf life.