



Marking its 60th year of publication, the Military Balance, published by the London based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) was launched at the Munich Security Conference. As the MoD in London considers how its Modernising Defence Plan (MDP) is to be implemented, this event gave a very timely reminder that developments around the world have an impact on the environment in which the UK government might expect its forces to operate. The multipolar nature of the current strategic environment is reflected by the competition between the US & China, and that between China & Russia. This competition is evidenced by the rise of modern technological platforms and sensors, eroding the west's supposed technical edge, reports Nick Watts, U K Defence Forum Deputy Director General.

IISS notes that the gap between the Russian and Chinese defence budgets has widened significantly over the past decade. In 2008, China spent 1.5 times more than Russia on military expenditure; in 2017, this gap increased to 2.4, when measured in real terms. China's defence expenditure has grown by an average of 8% of GDP, in the 10 years to 2017; despite an economic slowdown, defence expenditure in the last year grew by nearly 6%.

Regional competition in Asia is reflected by the introduction of new systems: China's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, returned to sea after a refit and modifications. China will soon have two carriers in service for the first time. IISS believes that China aims to achieve a fully-fledged power projection capability by 2049. It is also noted that if China entered the INF Treaty today almost all of its ballistic- and cruise-missile inventory would be prohibited.

One rationale ascribed to the US position on INF is that it does not capture the missile

capabilities of other states, notably China. China's weapons that would be prohibited under the current Treaty includes the DF-21D so-called 'carrier-killer' ballistic missile and perhaps all of China's short- and intermediate-range missiles ranged against Taiwan. Complying with INF Treaty restrictions would also remove a very significant percentage of China's missile launchers. IISS commentators feel that every effort should be made to re-start INF verification regimes, to re-establish confidence and security building measures used in the 1980s. However, they are not optimistic on this happening anytime soon.

China's first low-observable combat aircraft, the Chengdu J-20, appears to have begun deployment with an operational unit, the 9th Brigade in Wuhu, eastern China. Previously, the aircraft has only been seen with test and operational evaluation units. The Wuhu-based unit has in the past been associated with the introduction of new types into PLAAF service, including the Su-27SK and Su-30MKK variants of the Flanker family.

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The PLA Marine Corps has expanded its overall size, by converting four former army infantry and coastal-defence units into new marine brigades, two in each of the Northern and Eastern theatre commands. The size of the actual amphibious-assault force available to the PLA Army and Marine Corps remains largely unchanged, however; the new marine brigades are not yet equipped or trained for the amphibious-assault mission.

The Japanese government confirmed its intention to modify the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force's two large Izumo-class vessels to accommodate the F-35B short take-off and vertical landing variant of the Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter. Tokyo emphasised the limited nature of the plan, and that the ships will not be able to operate as full strike carriers. Nonetheless, integration of the F-35B will significantly enhance the ships' operational potential, including for limited power-projection “ or at least independent operation “ beyond the range of land-based aircraft.

Considering the debate between the present US administration and its European NATO Allies, the IISS notes a shortfall of billions between European NATO states defence spending and the 2% target. If this ambition was to be met, European Member States in NATO would have to

raise their collective defence expenditure by 38%, some \$102 bn. The United States accounts for 70% of total defence spending by NATO states. However, the IISS estimates that the actual costs of defending Europe represented 5.6% of the 2018 US defence budget, or US\$35.8bn, with the United States' military presence and operating bases in Europe costing an estimated US\$29.1bn in 2018. By contrast, European NATO member states spent US\$264bn altogether in 2018. In mid-2018, President Trump said that European NATO states should "immediately" increase defence spending to 2% of GDP and indicated that the US "might do its own thing" unless European allies started spending more on defence.

IISS notes developments in Russian military modernization: the 150th Motor-rifle Division, based near Rostov, activated its final motor-rifle regiment in December 2018, making it the first of the three divisions formed on the Ukrainian border to field the planned number of regiments. Russia has also expanded its special-forces and airborne capabilities, by adding independent Spetsnaz units at the army level, and to air-mobile infantry sub-units within existing motor-rifle formations. IISS commentators reminded their audience, at the launch, that Georgia's ambition to join NATO should be considered alongside its own internal reforms, as much as any geo-strategic considerations. Both Georgia and Ukraine have some way to go to ensure good governance internally.

Meanwhile, in the Middle East the Israeli Army chief admitted that for the last two years Israel had conducted air and missile attacks against Iranian forces in Syria. These attacks, which featured extensive use of stand-off precision munitions, have aimed to reduce Iran's direct threat to Israel and weapons transfers to Lebanese Hezbollah. Dr John Chipman, the Director General of IISS notes a rise in operations below the threshold of warfare: tolerance warfare – testing the tolerance of different kinds of aggression against states. This is seen in the breaching of agreements and internationally recognised rules. Democratic regimes find it difficult to respond to actions taken by autocracies, something which Putin and others have been exploiting.