



Powers such as China and Russia are challenging the global predominance of the United States and its allies, according to data and analysis from the International Institute for Strategic Studies' (IISS) The Military Balance 2018, launched on 14th February. Nick Watts (pictured) was there for Defence Viewpoints. Dr John Chipman, IISS Director-General and Chief Executive, believes that while great-power war is not inevitable, these three leading military powers are systematically preparing for the possibility of conflict.

The US and its allies can no longer assume the air dominance that has been a key advantage for three decades. In relation to China, findings show:

â€¢ Beijing looks on track to begin operating the Chengdu J-20 low-observable combat aircraft in front-line squadron service by 2020 â€” if this happens, the US would lose its monopoly on operational stealthy combat aircraft;

â€¢ China's PL-15 extended range air-to-air missile could enter service this year â€” this weapon appears to be equipped with an electronically scanned array radar meaning that China has joined the few nations able to integrate this capability on an air-to-air missile.

â€¢ Since 2000, China has built more corvettes, destroyers, frigates and submarines than Japan, South Korea and India combined;

â€¢ The total tonnage of new warships and auxiliaries launched by China in the last four years alone is significantly greater than the total tonnage of today's entire French navy;

â€¢ The launch of the first Type-055 cruiser indicates that the Chinese navy is closing another gap in its developing blue-water capabilities;

â€¢ China's navy is deploying further afield, including to Europe;

â€¢ Beijing's base in Djibouti will enable more naval deployments.

The major powers are also sharpening their focus on nuclear weapons, with China, Russia and the US all in the process of recapitalising and modernising their nuclear forces. The ability to defeat missile defences is driving delivery-systems developments in China and Russia, with both countries pursuing hypersonic glide vehicles.

In relation to Russia, IISS believes that though its armed forces continue to introduce new equipment, the generational shift in military materiel is taking place more slowly than anticipated as Russia experiences further funding and defence-industrial shortcomings. However, Moscow continues to demonstrate its willingness to use its forces close to home and abroad. In contrast to China, Russia is able to draw direct benefits from its real-world application of military power as it develops its equipment and personnel development plans.

Meanwhile, Europe saw the fastest growth in the world when it came to real-terms defence spending in 2017. While this increase in European spending may owe something to US exhortations for European leaders to boost their own military funding, it has also resulted from changing threat perceptions among European states.

However, Europe's growing defence investments are still not fully geared towards preparing European armed forces for future challenges. Smarter spending is needed to help better tackle threats, while future budget and capability limitations mean that it will also be important to develop new ways of working.

Some governments in the West will look to 'leap-ahead' technologies to augment and even deliver military power, but these are no guarantee of success. China's emerging weapons developments and broader defence-technological progress further its transition from 'catching up' with the West to becoming a global defence innovator. The West no longer has a monopoly on world-leading defence innovation and production, or the funds to enable these. Indeed, China might be the one to leap ahead. But to use its capabilities to best effect, China will need to make similar improvements in training, doctrine and tactics.

Defence policy makers are challenged by the complexity and uncertainty of today's security environment. The rise of transnational terrorism, proxy-militias and technological change make it harder to predict technological trends and political allegiances. Western powers, such as the UK which seek to retain a full spectrum capability will face an increasing challenge to spend their resources wisely.

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