Nick Watts and Len Barnett were at the launch today of the 2015 Military Balance, published annually by the London based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). It represents a 'snap shot' moment. Last year's event highlighted the increasingly complex strategic landscape; this year's launch highlighted the increasing levels of violence apparent around the world, say Nick Watts.

The IISS identified a widening 'arc of instability' as a significant threat, pointing out that military crises do not seem to end but to multiply. The paradox of this development is that the level of defence expenditure in Western Europe has continued to decline whilst those of other parts of the world increases.

The crises in the Sahel region which embraces both Mali and increasingly Nigeria, and the continuing instability in Libya are the more obvious manifestations of this trend in Africa, but the other conflicts in South Sudan, the DRC and in the Horn of Africa, seem to have vanished from the news agenda. The fighting in Syria has eclipsed the instability in Egypt, particularly Sinai. The complex situation in Iraq which has seen the rise of ISIS has paralysed the international community. The situation in Eastern Ukraine (below) is the most worrying development in Europe for many years. It has led to a complete breakdown in trust between the West and Russia.

All the while levels of defence expenditure continue to mount. Since 2010, according to IISS, defence spending in Asia has increased by a quarter; in the Middle East and North Africa by almost two thirds in the same period. For the last three years Russia has been increasing defence expenditure by 10%. Europe by contrast, has seen annual defence expenditure decline by 2% annually since the economic crisis of 2008. Regional powers are investing in modern equipment and technology. The technological edge which the West has long enjoyed is evaporating slowly.

Whether this trend will continue is open to question. Russia's economy is under pressure because of economic sanctions and the lowering of the price of oil. At the NATO summit in Wales in September the Alliance members pledged to increase defence expenditure to a level of 2% of GDP – within 10 years. Perhaps the deterioration in the situation vis a vis Russia since

then might jolt NATO's European members to put this undertaking into action – perhaps. The process of sequestration in the US means that Washington will continue to focus its efforts on Asia, where it sees both a challenge and an opportunity in its dealings with China. Europe, after all, is able to look after itself....

Len Barnett commented:

Concentrating on the section on Russia and Eurasia, there is highly useful analysis of Russian state operations in the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Not only does this show these coherently, with orders of battle and deployments, it goes a long way to cutting through Russian Maskirovka.

Equally, detail on Ukrainian governmental aspects, such as their unfortunate tactic of using 'long-range unguided munitions' prior to putting in troops is of real worth. In itself, this explanation puts day-to-day reports, such as by the OSCE, into context.

While gaps in information can be seen, such as there being no reference to some of the rebel groups (for instance 'Cossacks' and even a so-called 'Mujahedeen Battalion'), all in all this analysis can be characterised as both informative and interesting.

A fuller statement from IISS can be downloaded from HERE