

## Preface

The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) sees as one of its core missions the presentation to a wide public of the best available information on military holdings and strategy world-wide. For nearly half a century, the IISS has sought to provide facts on which intelligent policy analyses could be based. Each year we publish *The Military Balance*, an assessment of the military inventories held by some 170 countries. Especially since 2001, we have strengthened the information and analysis on opposition armies and terrorist groups. Given the greater saliency of transnational threats, there is a demand for more information on the military capabilities of non-state actors and also on their possible links with state actors. In addition, since 2002, we have strengthened our commitment and our abilities to provide information on nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) weapons proliferation, as well as ballistic missiles.

Over this period, the Institute has developed a reputation for consistently providing an objective record of world-wide military holdings. The IISS has always applied careful judgements in analysing material in the public domain, and material offered to it by governments, international organisations and NGOs, individual experts with specialised knowledge, defectors from repressive states, journalists and others who have volunteered information or from whom we have sought comments on drafts of our work.

We are well aware of the different political agenda that sources and informants of all kinds may have in providing us with information or in commenting on information that we propose to publish or that we have published. The Institute tries carefully to discount for possible bias and to be exacting in the nature of the evidence that it chooses to rely on in presenting this to a wider public. Equally, in assessing the military holdings of non-state groups or of closed societies, reliable raw data is not easy to find. This is true for sophisticated intelligence agencies, international bodies, journalists, academics, and organisations like the IISS. In these cases it is important to explain the bases on which a more speculative judgement might have to be based.

During the Cold War, the IISS did its best to publish information on the East-West balance. This was sometimes contested by governments, given the political sensitivities attached to the slightest presumed change in the 'relationship of forces'. Often, changes that we recorded in *The Military Balance* were not a result of actual changes in force holdings, but were based on better information, or a reassessment of the old. This continues to this day, as we make clear in that publication, which we hope is improved and more accurate each year. Today, the great controversies surround the military capacities of non-state groups

and the NBC holdings of proliferating states. This latter category is especially difficult, and inspires the most heated debates.

In September 2002, the IISS published *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Net Assessment*.

In that document, we attempted to bring together the best information available at the time, before inspectors were able to return to Iraq, on the history of Iraq's weapons programmes and the capacity that the regime had in a number of different areas to regenerate capabilities, accelerate work, renew production, or to add to stocks already held. Each chapter explained the nature of Iraq's historic ambitions and accomplishments in various programme areas. We explained, as clearly as could be done, the status of these programmes as understood by the international community and the inspectors that it had charged with investigating Iraqi activity in this area until they left Iraq in 1998. We then explained what Iraq might have been able to accomplish in each of the relevant programme areas. We then made a judgement as to the most likely current state of Iraq's programmes and inventory. We published a net assessment in tabular format. In each of the chapters from which these overall conclusions were drawn, we emphasised the range of possible outcomes. Whenever necessary we used the conditional tense in qualifying our judgements. We presented evidence, explained what the indications were in the absence of direct evidence, and where there was no clear evidence or strong indications we explained whether we thought a particular activity, programme or holding could or could not be ruled out.

We concluded that document by pointing out that 'This *Strategic Dossier* does not attempt to make a case, either way, as to whether Saddam Hussein's WMD arsenal is a *casus belli per se*.' We went on to say that: 'This *Strategic Dossier* invites policymakers and the public to make an early assessment of the relative risks of these different options and to choose a course that has the best chance of promoting regional and international security.' This wording was carefully chosen to underline the point that the IISS did not purport, in publishing the *Dossier*, to advance any specific policy aim.

This followed a longstanding Institute practice. The IISS does its best to separate any policy recommendations it may develop, or which we choose to publish by independent experts, from its presentation of the best available facts and assessments of military holdings.

Following the resumption of inspections in Iraq and then the war, it is clear that some of our assessments were proved correct, such as the development by Iraq of *al-Samoud* missiles that breached UN-set limits and our estimate that Iraq was at least several years away from being able to produce weapons-usable nuclear

material or long-range ballistic missiles by itself. Other assessments, like the judgement that Iraq would probably deploy chemical artillery in the event of an attack, proved wrong. Some of our other judgements could still be proved right or wrong by the work of the Iraq Survey Group. Other assessments might never be tested against precise fact unless documents emerge or other findings come to light that can clearly explain what the position might have been in September 2002 and how that position might have been affected by measures taken by the regime of Saddam Hussein as the threat of war against him strengthened.

Overall, the IISS believes that *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Net Assessment* stands up well when compared with other documents published at about the same time both by governments and NGOs. Nevertheless, we intend to publish later in 2004 an independent assessment of that study. We will also devote efforts to analysing the intelligence challenges in the proliferation field.

In the meantime, there remains a need for independent organisations such as the IISS to make the best possible dispassionate efforts to analyse the proliferation challenges that confront the international community. This has been rightly identified as a key security threat. Our role must be to gather all the information available on these challenges and put them in the public domain. By doing so, we can explain the bases on which governments and other actors should be developing policy. By drawing together in one place not just information, but an explanation of why that information may be incomplete or suspect, we can make a key contribution to the debate.

That sense of mission has brought us to apply our investigative and analytical efforts to the issue of North Korea's weapons programmes.

For many reasons, the task of assessing North Korea's weapons programmes is even harder than that of judging those of Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Based on public information, conclusions about North Korea's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons capabilities, ballistic missiles programme and conventional forces are woven from a cloth of different strands. One strand of information is official reports from governments seeking to penetrate North Korea's veil of secrecy, such as public reports from the US, South Korea and Russia. However, this information is qualified. North Korea is a notoriously 'hard target' for intelligence collection. Reliable human sources are sparse, communication intercepts are fragmentary, and satellite and other remote sensing means provide limited information, subject to multiple interpretations. Governments must also be cautious that information released in public does not jeopardise already fragile sources and methods, assisting more effective North Korean concealment and deception efforts.

Given the difficulties of collecting information, government 'assessments' of North Korea are analytical judgements, based on evaluations and estimations of capabilities and motivations rather than hard conclusions based on conclusive evidence. A North Korean intelligence analyst could safely 'assert' that the United States has nuclear weapons and South Korea does not. The comparable American analyst may only be able to 'assess' that North Korea has nuclear weapons. Conclusive proof is lacking and Pyongyang likes to keep the world guessing. In assessing ambiguous and uncertain foreign threats, intelligence agencies naturally lean towards 'worst case' assessments to err on the side of caution. This is a universal and understandable tendency. Prudently, governments prefer to plan on the worst case rather than be surprised by it.

Another strand of information on North Korea comes from direct observations. For nearly a decade, North Korea's main nuclear facilities at the Yongbyon nuclear centre have been inspected and monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which provides a technological baseline for evaluating their capabilities. Observation of North Korean missile tests provides some technical characteristics and parameters of missiles under development, and periodic interdictions of missile-related exports provide technical details of missiles that are being produced. This information is also limited. IAEA inspections have not extended to clandestine facilities, such as those presumed to exist in association with North Korea's enrichment programme, or to facilities and activities linked to nuclear weapons development, which are beyond the mandate of IAEA inspectors. Observations of missile tests and interception of missile exports cannot illuminate less observable research and development activities or answer questions of overall North Korean missile production, deployment and armament.

In addition to official government reports and direct observation, there are a number of weaker strands of information. Purported 'leaks' of government intelligence may provide insight into sensitive information, but it must be treated with caution. Leaked information is not necessarily accurate information. Officials who disclose classified intelligence to the media may have a political agenda, and it is often difficult to verify the veracity of such information. Over the last decade, a number of North Korean defectors and refugees have come forward with intriguing information on North Korean military programmes. Some of this information has proved to be credible, some of it is implausible, and some cannot be confirmed. Distinguishing the wheat from the chaff is often impossible, even for government agencies that seek to glean insights from such sources. As always,

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information from defectors and refugees has to be weighted against the possibility that they are unintentionally passing on false secondhand accounts or even fabricating tales for political and financial gain. To help illustrate the kind of information provided by such defectors, we have included tables in some of the chapters summarising the most important defectors that are publicly known and the information they have provided. There are also a number of secondary sources – press stories, magazine articles, reports from research organisations, books, and so forth. We have reviewed these for additional information and analysis, and cited the most valuable of these for readers who wish to explore subjects further.

Finally, there is information from the North Korean government itself. Obviously, this information has to be measured against Pyongyang's interest in manipulating the outside world's perceptions of its capabilities. At times, this interest may dictate denial of capabilities that actually exist. At other times, national interest may dictate invention or exaggeration of capabilities that do not exist. Moreover, North Korean efforts to sway and shape international perceptions are more sophisticated than public announcements from government agencies and private confidences from officials. North Korea is aware of the ways in which the outside world seeks to penetrate its secrets, and it takes active measures to mislead and conceal, whether to hide real capabilities or to create an impression of capabilities that do not exist.

With all these pitfalls in mind, we have tried to present a balanced and cautious set of assessments in individual chapters on North Korea's nuclear programme, its chemical and biological programmes, its ballistic missile programme, and the conventional military balance on the Korean Peninsula. To help establish political context, we have also included an opening chapter that recounts nearly 25 years of diplomatic efforts to deal with the North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile issues. The conclusion seeks to summarise the results of our efforts, identifying the underlying assumptions about technical capabilities and political motivations that form the basis for our judgements. To produce this *Dossier*, we used the same process followed for Iraq. Recognised technical experts were invited to draft chapters on each of the areas, and the chapters were then subject to review and comment by a wide range of experts in the field. The editor, aided by the research assistants, then produced a new draft, incorporating comments and additional information, and the original authors were given a final opportunity to respond to the penultimate drafts. The editor thanks the IISS editorial and design staff for their contribution to this publication.

Finally, we thank the various individuals who have contributed their knowledge and experience to the compilation of this *Dossier*. The responsibility for the information and judgements that we present is, unambiguously, ours alone.