Introduction

What is the balance of conventional forces between East and West? This is a question that has bedevilled NATO military planners for the past forty years, and one that is now receiving greater prominence with the imminent prospect of the elimination of intermediate-range nuclear forces from Europe. This renewed interest has sparked the publication of many assessments of the balance, yet, strangely, seldom are two alike. Why are these such divergent answers to what seems to be a straight-forward question?

The Level of Analysis

One reason lies in the level of analysis at which the East-West conventional force balance is measured. At the global level of analysis, the raw military potential of each alliance is compared. Population estimates and indicators of national economic performance, e.g., Gross Domestic Product, are standard measures used to approximate the manpower and material resource base from which military forces can be mobilized in times of war. One estimate of this balance is presented in the following table:

TABLE I

The Balance of Potential Military Power (1985 est.)

	NATO	RATIO	WARSAW PACT
Population (million)	642	1.6:1	393
Gross Domestic Product* (billion)	$6,750	2.4-3.6:1	$1,864-$2,764

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance 1986-87 IISS, London, 1986, pp. 15-19.

* For 5 out of 7 of the Warsaw Pact countries GNP was used instead, thus overstating the figure to some extent.