9 Security sector reform and conflict prevention

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Introduction

Conflict prevention is crucially important for creating stable and safe environments for people and states, for development and business. In two aspects, security sector reform (SSR) is particularly important for conflict prevention. First, SSR helps security institutions, as well as those institutions mandating and overseeing their work, to be in the best possible position to provide effective, efficient, and accountable security in order to prevent the escalation of insecurity and violence. Second, in cases where security institutions are among the very sources of insecurity, they need to be reformed so that they prevent – and not cause – insecurity.

SSR supports conflict prevention, and conflict prevention is an important pillar for peace, stability, and development. Putting it differently, investing in SSR such as developing SSR strategies, programs, and activities and promoting good security sector governance (SSG) principles, supports stability, prevents violent conflicts – both sudden and protracted ones – and sustains safe environments for economic investment, cooperation, and development. Failing to invest in it would be a strategic mistake from both political and economic standpoints. The following pages offer an overview of SSG and SSR, conflict prevention, and the link between them, before reflecting on the Swiss tradition of promoting good SSG globally and on the opportunity for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to promote good SSG among the countries participating in the BRI.

The security sector, good security sector governance, and security sector reform

The 2008 report on security sector reform by the UN Secretary-General offers a solid framework for a common, comprehensive, and coherent approach by the United Nations and its member states, reflecting shared principles, objectives and guidelines for the development and implementation of SSR (Hänggi and Scherrer 3–4). The report notes that:

It is generally accepted that the security sector includes defense, law enforcement, corrections, intelligence services and institutions responsible for border management, customs and civil emergencies. Elements of the judicial sector responsible for the adjudication of cases of alleged criminal conduct and misuse of force are, in many instances, also included. Furthermore, the security sector includes actors that play a role in managing and overseeing the design and implementation of security, such as ministries, legislative bodies and civil society groups. Other non-state actors that could be considered part of the security sector include customary or informal authorities and private security services.

(United Nations “Securing Peace and Development” para. 14; OECD/DAC; United Nations Development Programme 87)

As the security sector’s main purpose is to provide security as a public service to a state and its population, SSR needs to follow basic good governance principles. What do those principles of “good governance” mean when applied to security institutions? A brief look at some core good governance principles highlights their importance for the security sector:

- *Participation:* Security institutions and their personnel are representative of the population they serve, including women and men, and all ethnic groups.
- *Equity/inclusivity:* All members of society can join the security institutions, are treated equally by them and can participate in commenting on them – they see them as “their institutions” that are providing an important public service.
- *Rule of law:* The impartial enforcement of and adherence to law is crucial; security providers are not above the law and do not enjoy impunity; legal frameworks also must reflect the aspirations and roles of modern and professional security institutions.

- *Transparency:* Civil authorities and civil society actors have access to information about the work of their security institutions.
- *Responsiveness:* The professional and timely delivery of security and justice as a public service can be expected; the institution displays a distinct service-orientation.
- *Consensus orientation:* Coherent policies and responsibilities of the sector are based on inclusive and broad stakeholder consultation processes; ownership, direction, and scope of reforms are broad-based and broadly supported.
- *Effectiveness and efficiency:* Effective and professional management of security institutions and delivery of services is in place, based on a smart use of human capital and financial resources, while available resources match mandates, tasks, and efforts towards meeting good governance principles.
- *Accountability:* Security sector actors provide explanations and justifications, and accept responsibility for actions and decisions; they have structures in place that guarantee internal accountability and accountability to democratic and civilian authorities, as well as civil society organizations.

By promoting good governance principles in reform efforts, security institutions are more accountable to the state and its people; effective, efficient, and affordable; respectful of international norms, standards, and human rights; and considered as legitimate security providers by all stakeholders. They are respected, instead of feared by the people they serve.

The academic and practitioner literature as well as official and operational and institutional statements highlight that meaningful SSR should additionally embrace the following principles:

- SSR should be people-centered, locally owned, and based on democratic norms, human rights principles, and the rule of law, so that it can provide freedom from fear and measurable reductions in armed violence and crime. This principle must be upheld in both the design and the implementation of SSR programs. It should not simply remain at the level of proclamation and intention (Nathan; Donais).
- SSR must be seen as a framework to structure our thinking about how to address diverse security challenges facing states and their populations, through more integrated development and security policies and greater civilian involvement and oversight. National, broad and public consultation processes as well as a national

security strategy are thus inherent requirements of feasible SSR strategies.

- SSR activities should form part of multisectoral strategies, based on broad assessments of the range of security and justice needs of the people and the state. They have to respond to the needs of all stakeholders.
- SSR must be implemented through clear processes and policies that enhance institutional and human capacities to ensure that security policy can function effectively and justice can be delivered equitably (United Nations “Maintenance of International Peace”; European Commission; Council of the European Union; Hänggi).

While various types of reforms could take place (and have always taken place) within the security sector that do not aim at meeting SSG principles, these do not qualify as SSR. Such reforms include traditional train-and-equip activities that are part of military or police reforms outside the remit of SSR. While strengthening the effectiveness of security institutions’ performance, such reforms change very little in the way security institutions are run, governed, and perceived not only by the government, but also by the population they serve. Yet, these limited, technical reforms within individual security institutions (such as the military or police) are often preferred over more far-reaching SSR. Experience with close engagement throughout many regions of the world, including Asia, shows that, while the main tenets of SSG and SSR are usually not put in question, SSR sits less comfortably with governments favoring more centralized rule and limited oversight of security institutions by civilian actors. In such contexts, both political and military elites might fully appreciate the principles of SSG and SSR, yet for various reasons they do not want to be subjected to parliamentary oversight or managed by civilian ministries. In such situations, SSR can still focus on sensitization and investment in certain good governance principles, while waiting for a more conducive political environment supporting more far-reaching reforms.

Quite often – and this is the case not only in particularly difficult and challenging SSR environments – skepticism about SSR grows from a feeling that the approach to SSG and SSR needs to be adjusted to a country’s cultural, political, and historical contexts. Sometimes the main tenets of SSG and SSR are considered to be unduly influenced by Western or Northern notions of governance and the roles of security institutions in society (Schnabel “Ideal Requirements”). However, extensive engagement in SSG and SSR debates and applications in various regions around the world shows that their main tenets are not rejected

as Western/Northern notions. The challenges and responses that necessitate SSR remain very similar, regardless of whether seen from the North or the South: however, while the focus of SSR should be on SSG principles, the scope and sequencing of reforms must be attuned to local contexts and conditions (Aguja and Schnabel). Thus, while the concepts of SSG and SSR are not challenged in their basic foundations, different levels of willingness and preparedness to engage in SSR exist, depending on the nature of the political system, political stability, and economic well-being of the society concerned. As will be argued in more detail below, an effective, efficient and accountable security sector that is able to protect society against internal and external threats makes a strong contribution to internal and external peace and stability.

The need for SSR

Under which circumstances can we assume that a security sector is in need of reform? If the sector is not inclusive, is partial and corrupt, unresponsive, incoherent, ineffective, and inefficient and/or unaccountable to the public, then the sector (or any of its affected institutions) is in need of reform. The term “reform” describes an institutional and procedural transformation of the security sector that leads to improvements in the performance of a legitimate, credible, well-functioning, and well-governed security sector that, as a public service provider, delivers internal and external, direct and structural security.

The extent of the reform required in each specific instance depends on the changes and adaptations required for making the sector fulfill its roles in an efficient and accountable manner, and rarely involves a total overhaul. Some components and aspects of a nation’s security sector might be functioning very well, while others might be in need of extensive improvements. Thus, identifying where, how, and when individual institutions might need to be (re)built, restructured, changed, and/or fine-tuned is an important step. It requires a solid assessment of the sector’s roles, tasks, and requirements in light of national and local assessments of society’s security and development needs. Security sector assessments and SSR planning therefore ideally build on current and realistic national security policies and strategies.

What SSR does

Activities to reform, improve, and adjust a security sector focus on developing an effective, affordable, and efficient security sector, for example by restructuring or improving human and material capacities.

Reforms also include ensuring democratic and civilian control of the security sector, for example through strengthening the management and oversight capacities of government ministries, parliament, and civil society organizations.

Thus, referring again to the UN report mentioned earlier in the text, security sector reform

describes a process of assessment, review and implementation as well as monitoring and evaluation led by national authorities that has as its goal the enhancement of effective and accountable security for the State and its peoples without discrimination and with full respect for human rights and the rule of law.

(United Nations “Maintenance of International Peace” para. 17)

In operational terms, SSR covers a wide range of activities (Hänggi and Scherrer 15):

- *Overarching activities*, such as security sector reviews and their development, needs assessments, and development of SSR strategies and national security policies.
- *Activities related to security- and justice-providing institutions*, such as restructuring and reforming national defense, police, and other law enforcement agencies as well as judicial and prison systems based on SSR strategies and national security policies.
- *Activities related to civilian management and democratic oversight of security and justice institutions*, including executive management and control, parliamentary oversight, judicial review, oversight by independent oversight bodies and civil society organizations.
- *Activities related to SSR in post-conflict environments*, such as disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), control of small arms and light weapons, mine action, and transitional justice.
- *Activities related to cross-cutting concerns*, such as gender issues and child protection.

These SSR activities – and SSR’s contribution to peacebuilding and the prevention of violence and armed conflict – have political, economic, social, and institutional dimensions. The political dimension focuses on the promotion and facilitation of civilian and democratic control over security institutions; the economic dimension ensures appropriate allocation and consumption of society’s resources for the security sector; the social dimension holds that the provision of the population’s physical security should be guaranteed, and not threatened by the security

institutions; and, directly related, the institutional dimension focuses on the professionalization of all actors in the security sector (Wulf 5; Schnabel “Security-Development Discourse”).

Making the case for pursuing genuine SSR – and regional experiences

The consequences of ineffective and unaccountable security institutions can be detrimental to a society’s safety, stability, and security: suspicions and rumors spread about non-transparent security institutions among the public, media, and political decision-makers; human rights abuses and the absence of a proper response to them, and corruption and other misconduct by security institutions, create fear and distrust among the population. Furthermore, poor reputation of security institutions raises doubts about the legitimacy of state institutions in general and reduces society’s trust in, and loyalty to, the state and its institutions. Consequently, state and society are more likely to experience political crises, violent conflict, and low human and economic development. Investing in SSR helps tackle those problems and can contribute to reversing such negative tendencies and to mitigating some drivers in the escalation of tensions to open violence. Centralized political systems are less likely to embrace the holistic character of the security sector. By focusing reforms exclusively on security institutions’ capacity to strengthen their effectiveness through train-and-equip programs, while leaving aside investments in civilian management and oversight, they do not engage in SSR *per se*. More effective and less accountable security institutions may sway even further from their public duty of security provision and be feared and distrusted by the society they serve.

On the other hand, genuine SSR, embracing efforts to focus on both security provision and civilian oversight, create more effective and accountable security institutions, benefiting society in a number of ways: With more transparent, cost-effective, and legitimate security provision, security institutions are seen as important assets by the population; they enjoy a positive reputation within society and are seen as attractive employers; they bring broad benefits to society in the form of better security provision and the creation of a friendly environment for human and economic development; and they guarantee better protection of rights, security, stability, and rule of law. All of these benefits of SSR are critically important for conflict prevention and post-conflict recovery. Throughout the Asian region, experience shows that honest efforts by governments and security institutions towards strengthening not only their effectiveness through investments in new infrastructure,

equipment, and training activities, but also their accountability by investing in better relations with the media, civil society, and parliament have paid off in the short term, as reforms increased their reputation domestically as well as internationally. For instance, international investments have increased. At the same time, in places where reforms slowed down or were reversed, or security institutions were found to have committed major human rights breaches, international investments quickly pulled out.

Throughout the region, movement towards good SSG and subsequent SSR is challenged by a number of factors. In South Asia these include a shortage of independent and strong oversight/management bodies in the security sector; growing terrorist threats and organized crime; long histories of internal conflict; mixed success with DDR of armed non-state groups; or emerging existential and environmental threats. In Southeast Asia, the challenging environment for good SSG and subsequent SSR is characterized by, among other things, praetorian states – security institutions directly and indirectly intervening in politics and civilian leadership, including the military's role in parliament; an absence of independent and strong oversight/management bodies in the security sector; long histories of protracted internal conflicts and dragging peace processes; uneven success with DDR of armed non-state groups; growing terrorist threats, violent religious extremism, and organized crime; attempts by security institutions to crack down on public dissent, despite high “collateral damage” among the civilian population; and a lack of professionalism and SSG expertise in the security sector – among both security institutions and oversight institutions. In East Asia, the challenging environment for good SSG and subsequent SSR is characterized by, among other things, security providers who are accountable to non-pluralist democratic systems and alternative governance structures, as well as politicized security providers and strong presence of military influences in politics; oversight and management bodies in the security sector that are not freely elected; or ongoing armed conflict and the potential for nuclear proliferation.

However, there are also numerous positive developments that contribute to creating an increasingly conducive environment for sustainable SSG/R: There are established democracies in the region with professional security institutions, strong civilian control of security agencies, and solid respect for good governance principles. There is overall a considerable need and demand for SSG and SSR assistance, in addition to the considerable potential for some countries to act as donors and partners for such assistance in the region. Several countries

in the region have fast-growing economies, triggering an increase of middle-class and politically educated populations, along with political demands to carry out reforms and the resources to do so. Some countries in the region are historically large contributors to UN peacekeeping operations, while others would like to follow in their path. Peacekeeping training could thus potentially act as a driver for meeting international standards and initiating discussions on SSG and SSR activities. Moreover, some countries are interested in increasing their international development activities. In addition, there is political will for and commitment to regional experience-sharing, and in areas such as economic cooperation or disaster management, such regional and inter-subregional cooperation has taken place, for instance via the ASEAN+3 and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), or the East Asia Summit (EAS). Much can be learned from experiences across – and within – Asia with the design, performance, and reforms of countries' security sectors, and the impact and pay-off of such reforms on these countries' peace, stability, and prosperity.

SSR is a politically highly sensitive undertaking. Each country finds its own speed and sequencing in the design and implementation of SSR.

How do SSR and conflict prevention interlink?

The early prevention of the escalation of disputes and tensions to potentially violent conflicts, including through SSR, is a most pragmatic investment in peace and stability. Moreover, in political, economic, as well as human, terms it is much less costly to halt escalating violence than to deal with its consequences. Conflict prevention can mitigate or at least reduce the extraordinarily high human, political, social, and economic costs of violent conflict; it can preserve stability and peace, and it can advance human, regional, and international security and thus secure the foundations for prosperous development and trade (Schnabel and Carment).

Preventive efforts work best if applied as a continuum across all stages of a conflict. Development agencies and both humanitarian and civil society organizations (or security sector institutions) contribute to long-term, structural measures that stabilize societies and their political and economic structures and institutions. However, political actors focus more on crisis diplomacy at advanced stages of conflict escalation. Further along the spectrum of preventive strategies, particularly when initial prevention has failed and tensions have escalated, the deliberate and strategic use of rewards and punishments are expected to bring conflicting parties to the negotiating table – and eventually

convince them of the mutual advantages in pursuing compromise solutions. Finally, when there is no consent by the conflict parties, but a sense of an international responsibility to prevent potential grave acts of mass violence or direct threats to international peace and security, third parties including the United Nations and regional organizations may be expected to intervene militarily. Conflict prevention thus ranges from long-term development activities and the promotion of good governance, including in the security sector, to traditional diplomacy, and from crisis diplomacy to more forceful and intrusive forms of preventive interventions.

State governments hold the main responsibility for efforts to prevent disputes from escalating into violence. Actors above and below government levels put pressure on political elites and encourage and empower populations to demand democracy, transparency, and accountability. In that regard promoting good governance is key to the constructive transformation of conflict and the prevention of violence. External support plays an important role in triggering, facilitating, and maintaining local and regional initiatives until those are self-sustaining. Here the United Nations, regional organizations, individual foreign ministries and development agencies, as well as international nongovernmental organizations play a crucial role in encouraging and financing local and national initiatives.

In a study carried out as part of the background research to support the 2017 World Bank/UN study *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, security sector reform

is seen as a means of progressively building resilient security and justice systems while addressing many of the root causes and drivers of conflict that stem from ineffective, poorly managed, or unaccountable security and justice institutions. Security and justice institutions are commonly the primary interface between the state and the population they are meant to serve. In many contexts they are the litmus test for the effectiveness of the state. Their protracted ineffectiveness or poor integrity represent potential for the escalation of conflict.

(DCAF 2)

The report further argues that

there is an opportunity to build on examples of the application of SSR principles that have demonstrated an indispensable role in preventing violent conflict and addressing the underlying drivers of conflict. As demonstrated in the case of SSR processes [in many countries where SSR activities have taken place], a sustained,

comprehensive and integrated SSR approach significantly contributes to conflict prevention in times of transition.

(DCAF 2)

SSR plays an important role for measures that – in combination or by themselves – can help reduce the main forces of violent conflict. These measures include the support for democratic transition and consolidation; support in establishing legitimate, representative, and inclusive government authorities; building professional and accountable security institutions; prevention of state-sponsored or -tolerated human rights abuses; and ensuring that the ethnic composition of the security institutions mirrors the population at large. Measures also include the sufficient and broad provision of public services; stabilization of the national economy, including the creation of a stable, transparent, and non-discriminatory environment for private sector development and investment; and trade liberalization and uniform economic development along ethnic lines; resolution of long-standing inter-group grievances, including armed ones, and facilitation of reconciliation; and the prevention of human flight and the creation of an attractive environment for local talent and expertise. All these are important preventive measures in their own right, but also in combination with SSR. The measures contribute to the promotion of good governance, by promoting accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, responsiveness, effectiveness, efficiency, and rule of decent law.

The concept of SSR emerged from the security and development debate. Having evolved in the late 1990s from experiences in fragile post-conflict contexts, it was based on the recognition that reforming a country's security sector and putting security institutions under civilian control are important contributions to and requirements for peace, stability, and long-term prevention of violent conflict. These, in turn, are prerequisites for sustainable economic and human development. While SSR's important role was not recognized in the Millennium Development Goals, it was recognized in the World Development Report 2011 on "Conflict, Security and Development" (World Bank) and of course in the United Nations' Agenda 2030 (particularly Sustainable Development Goal 16 on "Peace, justice and strong institutions").

Switzerland's commitment to building SSG and SSR capacity around the globe and the relevance for China's Belt and Road Initiative

In the context of this joint Chinese and Swiss effort to explore opportunities for conflict prevention, it is worth noting that Switzerland has

for decades been committed to promoting conflict prevention through capacity building in security sector governance. Almost 20 years ago Switzerland initiated the creation of DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, in order to offer non-partisan support to efforts by national and international actors to bring security sectors around the world closer in line with good governance principles.

Throughout this volume, contributors, particularly the Chinese contributors, point to China's various new initiatives in international relations, including its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI aims to improve regional cooperation on a trans-continental scale, by strengthening infrastructure, trade, and investment links between China and some 65 other countries covering Central, South, and Southeast Asia, the Gulf countries, North Africa, and Europe. While the BRI aims to bring lasting prosperity and peace to the countries benefiting from the initiative, a welcoming environment for regional cooperation, development, trade, and economic investment *already requires* a significant level of peace and stability. Investments made in the context of the BRI will only last if and as long as basic stability and security are enjoyed by participating countries. Many of these countries, however, suffer from weak security sector governance, which features prominently among the causes of instability, conflict, and violence. Thus they are in dire need of SSR. As this chapter argues, investments made towards better functioning and increasingly accountable security sectors, backed by populations who trust their security institutions, will address some of the causes of tension and help prevent potential escalations to violent conflict. Investments made in SSR are thus complementary to the BRI's investments in infrastructure, trade, and development. The returns on meaningful SSR will be felt by the affected populations, their governments, neighboring nations, and China. The BRI would thus not only bring development, jobs, and wealth to its participating countries, but also increased peace, stability, and order. Moreover, the BRI could offer a highly useful platform for cross-national and inter-regional experience-sharing on SSR.

Given Switzerland's expertise in SSR support and China's interest in stable and prospering BRI participating states, the BRI could serve as a vehicle to promote good security sector governance throughout the BRI community, possibly as a joint Chinese–Swiss initiative.

Conclusion: investing in SSR as a means to support conflict prevention and building sustainable futures

SSR makes sense in its own right, as it improves the delivery of security services and accountability of security providers. SSR reduces the

likelihood for security institutions becoming a source of insecurity. SSR builds their capacity to effectively mitigate threats to people's security and prevent the violent escalation of disputes. Investments in SSR are simultaneously investments in conflict prevention, and they improve security and stability domestically and regionally. As well, investments in SSR in neighboring regions are always investments in one's own security.

In sum, SSR is vital for conflict prevention, and both are vital for stability, which is a key ingredient for successful regional cooperation, business, and development. Matching Switzerland's experience in providing SSR support with China's interest in preventing violent conflict and advancing peace through development as part of BRI would be a win-win situation for everyone involved: Switzerland would be able to lend non-partisan support to meaningful, context-specific SSR initiatives throughout China's numerous BRI projects; China would promote and support these activities in order to create a stable environment for development and investment; and the affected societies would benefit from a more effective and accountable security sector and long-term, sustainable conflict prevention and economic development.

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