POLICY BRIEF

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Security Sector Governance
and Conflict Management in Southeast Asia

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Security sector governance (SSG) poses a huge challenge to states transitioning to democracy, particularly in cases where the military and other components of the security sector had been very influential in the conduct of government affairs. SSG is even more of a challenge in conflict-ridden societies where the state's capacity to ensure internal security has been undermined. Democratic norms suggest that effective SSG involves not only the management of core security forces, but also competent civilian oversight. In addition, SSG programmes in Southeast Asia will have to recognise and address the specific realities and experiences of a particular country. This policy brief is based on the proceedings of the Second Study Group Meeting on 'Security Sector Governance and Conflict Management in Southeast Asia' organised by the Institute for Strategic and Development Studies, Inc. (ISDS, Philippines) in collaboration with the RSIS Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies on 11 February 2011.

The governance of the security sector has been a constant challenge for democratising states, especially in cases where a country's armed forces have been so much of an influence that civilian institutions cannot function effectively without their support and strong presence. It presents an even greater challenge when a situation is aggravated by existing conflicts; these undermine the legitimacy of the state, thus challenging both military and civilian capacities to provide security for the people.

While the security forces of each country do maintain their distinct nature, orientation and culture, democracy entails adherence to the common principle that such institutions have to be subject to civilian control even as their capacity to perform their function and mandate is strengthened. To this end, government and civilian institutions must competently exercise their administrative and oversight functions, to ensure that security forces not only carry out their duties effectively but also perform them within the bounds of democratic norms.

Security Sector Governance (SSG)

SSG involves organising and managing the security sector. The security sector, in turn, is defined as the aggregation of institutions responsible for the protection of the state and its constituent communities. The sector includes, among others, statutory core security forces, administrative oversight bodies as well as societal institutions. An effective SSG programme thus has a significant impact on conflict management, as the aims of the latter are to bring about the end of existing conflicts, reduce the possibility that existing conflicts escalate into catastrophic civil wars and/or prevent the occurrence of conflicts in the future.

Internal conflicts could arise out of the clamour of particular groups for societal change, and such conflicts may be exacerbated by security forces which act in an unprofessional manner and do not discharge their functions effectively.

In cases where political conflicts such as clan disputes and electoral wars persist, a weak and poorly governed security sector suffers from the effects of intense political influence and pressure exerted by local politicians. These politicians employ members of the security forces as part of private security groups and armies, and in return they provide them with financial support and protection from punishments under the law.

Worse, members of security forces may start their own uprising, especially when they believe that civilian governments are failing to respond to societal pressures, or that the sitting government is incapable of governing the country. As such, members of the security sector become the instigators of intra-state conflicts due to their understanding of their mandates and capabilities differing from that of the law.

SSG and Conflict Management

The relationship between SSG and conflict management is highly relevant, as an effective SSG programme will have a significant impact on conflict. In the context of Southeast Asia, internal security has always been a major concern for security actors, as countries in the region have experienced problems such as secession, ethnic violence and ideological tensions. Internal security challenges have posed threats not only to domestic political stability, but have also had a major impact on ASEAN as a regional organisation which espouses comprehensive security. It is important to note that, within ASEAN, regional stability is related to the ability of its member states to maintain national harmony and order.

The case of Indonesia illustrates the impact of internal challenges on SSG efforts. While the authoritarian nature of the Suharto regime has been identified as one of the root causes of conflicts in the country, its aims of promoting development, stability and equity in society are clear. However, the regime's reform programmes did not yield the desired results. For instance, the centralisation of power – which led to policies such as *transmigrasi* (transmigration) – had instead contributed significantly to the nature of the conflicts in the country in subsequent years. The escalation of conflicts in the country was also due to, among other reasons, the poor governance of the security sector and an accumulation of bad practices which have evolved into an institutional culture. In the following years, certain reforms were introduced to address these issues. Rather than being initiated from the outside, as might have been expected, the initial reforms came from within the military itself. Other institutional reforms, such as the separation of the military from the police, followed.

While it is hard to ascertain the direct impact of SSG reforms on the management of conflict in Indonesia, the changing behaviour of the military, as well as shifts in the government's approach to the carrying out of counter-insurgency measures, seems to have had significant effects, especially in forging more peaceful means of managing and resolving conflicts, such as in the case of Aceh.

In other cases in the region, SSG programmes were driven by or highly contingent upon external factors, such as international organisations and the donor community. This presents risks and challenges especially when specific SSG programmes are adopted without considering the relevant social, political and even cultural particularities of each country.

In the case of Thailand, for instance, security sector reform programmes have had little impact on the country's security forces, particularly the military. This is primarily attributed to the relative weakness of Thailand's oversight and law enforcement bodies and the deep political divide between elites and royalists on the one hand, and poor protesters on the other. More significantly, the country's experience reflects a situation where the military has become a major political actor, resulting in the lack of progress on SSR programmes. Any reform agenda would therefore have to take these into account if there is to be hope for genuine change.

The politicisation of the military has also made the establishment of better civil-military relations a great challenge, and this also impinges on the prospects for meaningful reform. This is reflected in the current strategies of the Thai government for curbing the violence in southern Thailand, wherein a 'new internal-security state' has emerged which has been used to give more discretion to military solutions to the conflict.

As such, it could be argued that SSG programmes for countries such as Thailand would need to reflect, in one way or another, the specific realities and contexts within which security actors play an important role, while adhering to generally accepted principles governing the security sector as well as civil-military relations, and giving importance to societal perspectives when addressing these issues.

The same argument could be made in the case of other Southeast Asian countries experiencing varying levels of intra-state conflicts. In order for SSG programmes to produce positive results, they would need to take into consideration a country's specific circumstances and experiences, for example, the ethno-religious dimensions of conflict in Vietnam and the way national security is conceptualised; the environment of political patronage and the twin insurgencies in the Philippines; and the multi-ethnic, pluralist culture in Malaysia and its view of national security (as shaped by its colonial experiences under the British).

Recognising the inherent political and cultural dynamics within the different countries in the region is a necessary step in contextualising SSG programmes, thus making them relevant.

Conclusion

The aforementioned cases show that SSG can act as a vehicle to address the problem of conflicts in countries in Southeast Asia. While not all countries in the region espouse democracy as their form of government, it is nonetheless important to note that ASEAN has indicated its adherence to the principle of democracy as the shared value that each member state must strive to promote and practise.

Instituting SSG, and understanding its limitations and its implementation problems, is critical to ASEAN if it were to succeed in its goal of promoting peace and security in the region.

More importantly, building international cooperation through SSG is important because ASEAN countries work together as a bloc (mostly and increasingly), in its engagement with partners in the Asia-Pacific region, other major powers and international institutions. For ASEAN to be effective in external and also regional engagement, it will have to keep its own house in order, so to speak.

About the Author

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