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Reforming Southeast Asia's security sectors

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Introduction

In developing an agenda for security-sector reform, policy-oriented research has drawn primarily on the experience of states in sub-Saharan Africa and, to a lesser extent, Central America, the Caribbean and the South Pacific.[1] Mention of Southeast Asia has been restricted to Cambodia, with occasional references to Indonesia and the regional security role of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF). This paper makes three related arguments. The first is that the relative neglect of Southeast Asia is unfortunate given that the region's security sectors are, to a greater or lesser degree, afflicted with the same problems that security-sector reform seeks to remedy in other parts of the developing world. Second, such reform in Southeast Asia must be viewed in the broader context of the evolution of regional states' political systems, particularly changing patterns of civil–military relations. Domestic economic, social and political change, resulting in the growth of civil society and democratisation, has driven significant restructuring in some regional states' security sectors, with results often compatible with the reform agendas of Western governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The third argument is that, while Western governments' sponsorship of military-to-military contacts in the interests of security-sector reform can sometimes play a useful role, greater attention should be paid to enhancing the capacity of civilian mechanisms to supervise Southeast Asia's security sectors.

What is security-sector reform?

The term 'security sector' is widely understood to refer to those bodies that are 'responsible for, or should be responsible for, protecting the state and the communities within it'.[2] They comprise at least two main elements: groups with mandates to use force (the military, the police, paramilitary forces, intelligence organisations); and institutions responsible for managing and overseeing matters of defence and internal security (defence ministries, parliaments and NGOs).[3]

There is, however, no single, standard definition of security-sector reform, nor a single understanding of the shortcomings it is meant to address. Nicole Ball has identified a range of problems that afflict security sectors in developing countries, and that impede the 'good governance' which is widely seen as a prerequisite for economic and social development.[4] Ball lists the typical problems as:

- bloated security establishments that are difficult to support financially, but frequently constitute a major political and economic force;
- lack of transparency and accountability in the security sector;
- inadequate defence planning, management and budgeting in both civilian and military institutions;
- a long history of human-rights abuse by the security forces;
- a tendency for security forces to act with impunity;
- corruption;
- an insufficient number of civilians with the capacity to manage security matters; and
- inadequate professional development.

Since the late 1990s, Western governments, like Canada's and Britain's, together with NGOs and multilateral financial institutions, such as the World Bank, have supported various forms of security-sector reform in developing countries. At the same time, it is widely recognised that the security sector has a legitimate—indeed vital—role to play in providing a stable framework for development in the face of internal and external threats, and that providing such security requires the 'appropriate allocation of resources'.[5] Ball has identified five 'central elements' of security-sector reform:[6]

- strengthening civilian management of the security forces, and their accountability to civilian authorities;
- encouraging transparency in security-sector planning, management and budgeting;
- creating a climate in which civil society can monitor the security sector and be consulted regularly on defence policy, resource allocation and related issues;

- fostering an environment that promotes regional or sub-regional peace and security; and
- disarmament, demobilisation and the reintegration of former combatants in countries emerging from civil war.

The embryonic literature on security-sector reform does not, however, adequately engage with a key problem in some developing countries: the fact that the armed forces may dominate or strongly influence the political system. While the pattern of civil–military relations has shifted in favour of civil society in many African, Latin American and Asian states, democratisation is by no means universal. In Southeast Asia, the military remains dominant in Burma, and highly influential in Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Wherever the military remains politically strong and assertive, it is unrealistic to expect that the problems identified by Ball and others can be significantly ameliorated. Although the literature recognises that the commitment of a country's national leadership is vital for reform to succeed, it is commonly assumed that external actors (essentially Western governments) will set the reform agenda and take the initiative. In terms of motivating security-sector reform, there is insufficient acknowledgement of the potential for indigenous political development, specifically the growth of civil society, the related impetus for constitutional reform and the establishment of democratic norms and practices, to motivate security-sector reform. In Southeast Asia, the most important reforms, in Thailand and the Philippines, have been a consequence of much broader processes of social and political change.