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Tackling the challenges of SSR

by Thierry Tardy

A sound security sector is key to the development and stability of countries in transition, and Security Sector Reform (SSR) has therefore become central to the EU's broad security agenda. A decade ago the European Commission and the Council Secretariat adopted two separate SSR concepts, which at the time was revealing of the existing cultural and operational differences between the then two 'pillars'. This contributed to uncoordinated policies and proved incompatible with the spirit of the comprehensive approach. In May 2015, therefore, the Foreign Affairs Council invited the High Representative and the Commission to develop, by mid-2016, an 'EU-wide strategic framework for SSR', which must 'bring together CSDP and all other relevant CFSP tools as well as development co-operation instruments and freedom, security and justice actors.'

As of 2016, 14 of the 17 on-going CSDP operations include an SSR dimension, with only the two maritime operations – Atalanta and Sophia – and the monitoring mission in Georgia not being involved in reforming the security sector of recipient states. Missions such as EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUCAP Sahel Mali, EUSEC RDC, EUMAM RCA or EUAM Ukraine typically target the security sectors of the states concerned.

In the meantime, the European Commission is engaged in numerous SSR-related activities, in parallel with CSDP or independently. The Commission mainly finances SSR programmes that are carried out by third parties – be they international organisations, contractors/private companies, NGOs, partner states or EU member states.

This being said, 20 years of SSR activities offer mixed results. While many programmes have contributed to the long-term stabilisation and much-needed reform of the host nations, many others are assessed less positively. In this context, the forthcoming SSR strategic framework is expected to provide a new roadmap and then, hopefully, more tangible results.

What follows is a short review of the main challenges that the EU faces in its SSR activities and that the SSR policy – and subsequent implementation – will have to address one way or the other.

External vs. internal politics. An external presence that aims to reform the security sector of a country in transition inherently suffers from the highly political nature of such a process. As a key component of the state apparatus, the security sector directly connects to the heart of state sovereignty. Any attempt to alter the distribution of power within the sector, be it within one particular area (police, judiciary, parliament, etc.) or among those different branches, is extremely sensitive, irrespective of where the initiative comes from. In this context, the top-down externally-driven approach that characterises SSR and the focus on the *reform* dimension of the exercise are inherent sources of resistance on the part of local actors/elites that are often mainly concerned with *status quo* and their own prerogatives. SSR relates to 'theories of change', i.e. the idea that peace and stability will result from change in the society, political system, distribution of power, which is triggered by the external presence. In other words, SSR entails a level of political and social reshuffle that is expected to create frustration and resistance.

Local ownership. These concerns are to be remedied by a constant political dialogue with the host nation as well as lasting local buy-in not only at the highest level of the state apparatus, but also in lower political and administrative layers, and beyond the capital city (decentralisation). Alongside the possibility for the main recipients of an SSR programme to shape its mandate, the issue is also the capacity of local actors to absorb the changes that an operation implies. Yet local actors are seldom involved in the design of SSR programmes. More worryingly, local actors can also be spoilers of a peace process and become threats to the external presence. When this is the case, international institutions are largely ill-equipped to respond. This, in turn, leads to the question of whose security SSR is supposed to be about. EU-led SSR programmes are largely state-centric in the sense that they aim at strengthening the state apparatus. While the human security element is theoretically central, in practice it is often seen as a by-product of good governance at the state level. *De facto*, civil society actors are not predominant interlocutors of SSR programmes.

Fragmentation vs. coherence. While SSR programmes can only produce results if they are wide-ranging and combine in a coordinated effort activities at different levels (police reform, criminal justice, anti-corruption), in practice they tend to suffer from a piecemeal approach, with lines of effort that are insufficiently coordinated or simply the object of uneven focus. Crisis management is a lot about defining priorities so that impact can be maximised through concentrated effort. The downside of this is neglect of areas that are nonetheless key to the overall success of SSR. A police reform that would not simultaneously tackle corruption or weaknesses in the penitentiary system would likely fail to have a sustainable impact. At a different level, these tactical considerations can only be examined in a broader strategic context, i.e. the need for SSR programmes to be embedded into and serve a wider stabilisation framework that evolves over time. SSR implies internal coordination of its various branches, but also a clear positioning in the EU broader governance/development/peacebuilding agenda, let alone inter-institutional coordination.

Rewards vs. penalties. Endemic corruption that characterises many of the countries under consideration makes all of the good governance principles difficult to implement, and so far the record in anti-corruption programmes is not encouraging. As an example, raising salaries of civil servants to reduce the temptation of corruption does not seem to have produced tangible results and, furthermore, is difficult to artificially sustain for long periods of time. Anti-corruption and anti-impunity programmes are also faced with issues of witness protection and the difficulty to target higher-ranked officials rather than only lower-rank staff. Furthermore, the changes induced by SSR programmes require the identification of incentive structures that have proven difficult to establish. At a macro-level, the combination of economic (through some kind of tangible pay-offs) and political incentives on the one hand, and some sort of penalties on the other, needs to be tailor-made. Yet incentives at an individual level are more difficult to implement.

Long- vs. short-term. SSR suffers from a tension between long-term needs and short-term commitments. By nature, reforming a security sector – or even, in some cases, creating it from scratch – is a decade-long process and therefore requires a degree of commitment that, more often than not, the EU and its member states cannot undertake. Some operations end up lasting a decade or even more. In those cases, the inevitably fading interest on the part of member states impacts negatively on the mission.

Institutional capacity and lessons learnt. Finally, SSR activities would benefit from a proper EU capacity (at HQ level, in CSDP operations and EU Delegations) that would strengthen coherence and effectiveness in at least three areas: conflict analysis and understanding of local dynamics and needs; coordination of efforts from the three EU branches involved in SSR (CSDP, development and JHA); and monitoring of on-going programmes and lessons learnt.

The added-value of the EU for SSR is well understood and appreciated. By nature, the security sector is composed of different branches which, to be reformed, require a joined-up and cross-cutting approach that the EU is well-positioned to provide. The mix of available financial resources and renowned expertise across the board also makes the EU an obvious SSR actor. Yet these assets may not be sufficient. For SSR to be more effective, the new strategic framework would have to provide clarity on a level of ambition/expectations and means for a better impact. As, in the end, change can only be home-grown and – at best – only facilitated by external actors.

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