



Kingdom of the Netherlands



Increasing UN Support for Defense Sector Reform? An Experts Discussion

Meeting Note

Introduction

The Permanent Mission of the Netherlands to the United Nations, the Permanent Mission of Malaysia to the United Nations, and the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) hosted a working-level meeting on the UN's role in defense sector reform (DSR) on 2 December 2010 at the New York University Midtown Center.

The meeting brought together Military Advisers and Political Counselors from Member States to discuss the merits of more explicit engagement by the UN in DSR, the possible forms that such engagement might take, and the resources and capacities that this might require. Following opening comments by H.E. Mr. Hamidon Ali, the Permanent Representative of Malaysia to the UN, the Department of Peacekeeping Operation's (DPKO) Security Sector Reform Unit (SSR-U) provided an overview of its draft policy on DSR. H.E. Mr. Herman Schaper Permanent Representative of the Netherlands to the UN offered concluding remarks. The discussion, held under Chatham House Rule, was moderated by CIC Deputy Director for Programs (Conflict), Jake Sherman.

SSR Unit's Draft DSR Policy

In presenting the draft policy, the result of an extensive twenty-six month DSR review, the SSR-U underscored that DSR is conceptually embedded within broader SSR efforts; must come either at the request of the national government or in response to a Security Council or General Assembly mandate; must be grounded in the local context; and must proceed according to human rights norms and standards and international law. While the draft policy foresees that most DSR activities will continue through bilateral channels, it suggests a broad array of potential areas for UN engagement in political and technical dimensions across the strategic, operational and tactical levels. The policy explicitly does not include UN training for offensive military operations, but acknowledges the role of bilateral partners in these areas.

Getting the Politics Right

Participants agreed that the UN must account for a country's context when engaging in defense sector reform – the social dynamics, interests, and entrenched legacies present in the security sector. Indeed, the discussion underscored the fundamentally political nature of defense sector reform and, in this context, both the importance of local ownership and the challenge of altering established political, economic, and social power vested in the defense sector. Yet, while national ownership was routinely mentioned as a key element of success, the discussion did not address strategies for reconciling the at times competing priorities between (and often within) national governments, bilateral partners, and donors.

In post-crisis and post-conflict situations, it was noted that DSR is often a critical component of rebuilding state legitimacy and a condition of reestablishing a social contract between the state and its people. This is true both in cases of predatory armed forces and those where the defense establishment serves narrow aims of regime protection.

The UN's Role: Identification of Priorities, Coherence, and Coordination

UN political and peacekeeping missions are increasingly being specifically mandated to support DSR. Participants generally supported a continued, if not increased UN role in DSR, but there was no consensus on what form or scope this engagement should take. Several discrete roles for UN support for DSR were offered during the meeting: (i) providing strategic advice, including identification of national DSR priorities; (ii) coordination of DSR engagement across the spectrum of bilateral and multilateral; (iii) matching Member States requiring specific capacities to Member States able to provide them, in recognition of the fact that the UN has relatively less technical competency in DSR than bilaterals; and/or (iv) serving as a repository for best practices, standards, and guidance.

Participants highlighted the UN's extensive experience in helping post-conflict countries identify and prioritize needs. It was emphasized that the UN is comparatively well placed to act as the facilitator to help the national authorities articulate their national defense strategies and prioritize reform programs and projects for donors and bilateral partners. Despite the UN's coordination role in other areas of assistance, many participants were skeptical about the feasibility of such a UN role for DSR due to its lack of authority vis-à-vis bilaterals. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, it was noted that donors and bilateral partners and particularly national authorities have explicitly prevented the UN from coordinating DSR activities; it was unclear how the UN could overcome this opposition.

A related – if more modest – role would be to enable coherence among DSR actors by providing a platform for “matchmaking” and sharing information on guiding principles and good practices. One participant underscored the lead role of member states, commenting that the UN should not develop its own standing capacity; support may come *through* the UN, but it should not come *by* the UN because member states may be reluctant to second their limited pool of experts directly to the UN.

Organizing for Effectiveness

The discussion moved to identifying the potential involvement and comparative advantages of different UN departments, offices, and units for DSR. The current lead role of the SSR unit, part of DPKO's Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI) ensures that DSR is situated within a holistic SSR approach. It was noted that OROLSI is increasingly providing expertise to DPA-led political missions involved in mediating broad political frameworks under which DSR will be undertaken.

Other participants raised the potential for more active involvement by DPKO's Office of Military Affairs (OMA) in terms of in-house capacity and generation of Member State DSR capacities. A comparison was made to the UN Police Division's policy support for UNPOL and to the training and mentoring role of UNPOL officers deployed on field missions.

Conclusion

While there is currently very limited capacity for DSR at the UN, there was no clear agreement among Member State participants about what form an enhanced UN capacity would take. Participants were, however, constructive in their comments to frame future UN support in this area. Further discussion will be necessary to develop consensus. Moving ahead, the two possible approaches were identified: First, examining what the UN should *not* be doing in defense sector reform – i.e., identifying political and other redlines for member states. Or, second, identifying areas of agreement on what *is* an appropriate role for the UN in supporting national defense sector reform efforts. To help gain greater clarity, it was agreed that further working level discussion is required ahead of a planned future meeting, in early 2011, at the Permanent Representative and Deputy Permanent Representative level leading up to the C34.