DCAF Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance

Photo: DCAF

Strategy for Asia-Pacific
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Introduction

The Asia-Pacific region is characterized by a great diversity of national experiences with, and approaches to, security sector governance. As everywhere in the world, in all countries of the region there is room for improvement. The Asia-Pacific region is vast and, for geographic, historic and socio-cultural reasons, can be further divided into several sub-regions: South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Oceania. To capture similarities and differences in security sector experiences and approaches across this vast area, DCAF organizes its work in three distinct contexts: the Asia-Pacific region overall; four sub-regions; and individual countries. While project-based SSG/R activities tend to take place in national contexts and are developed by DCAF and its national partners, SSG/R experience-sharing and learning are facilitated along sub-regional and regional lines. This approach has guided DCAF's activities throughout the previous strategy and has proven to be an effective way to generate meaningful and sustainable steps towards improving SSG in all countries.

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Key security challenges and opportunities

Many countries in the Asia-Pacific region face challenges that stand in the way of developing security sectors that embrace the principles of good governance in the provision of security as a public service to all members of society. DCAF's contributions will build on numerous positive developments that create a conducive environment for sustainable SSG/R, as well as on our expertise and experience developed during previous support in the region.

Democratic governance

We can learn from several established democracies with professional security institutions, strong civilian control of security agencies, and good governance principles being well appreciated in the public sector, and from relatively young democracies that are experiencing democratic transitions. Several national partners in DCAF's regional SSG Network include representatives from various oversight actors in their national SSG working groups, which is often the first time these institutions have had a chance to gather around the same table to discuss the challenges in their countries. DCAF has also managed to engage partners from societies with less enthusiasm for democratic governance in discussions on the value of good SSG, such as China.

Security institutions themselves are asking to learn more about international standards, principles, and experiences in other parts of the region. For several years DCAF has been responding to such calls from the military and police, for example in the Philippines, where despite setbacks and internal sensitivities

about institutional and attitudinal reforms, exposure to international standards and practises have been valued amongst those interested in reform.

Civil society and media

Several countries in the region have fast-growing economies with a growing middle class and politically-educated population, and vibrant civil societies and influential civil society organisations (CSOs) that do not hesitate to ask for political reforms (South and Southeast Asia). For instance, several years of engagement with community radio stations in southern Thailand and with academic institutions and CSOs in Mindanao have illustrated strong interest in building capacities to conduct oversight of security institutions. In those two contexts, such activities are also important contributions to ongoing peace processes. In several countries, strong CSOs have been calling for gender equality in the security sector (Cambodia, India, Malaysia, Nepal, Philippines and South Korea). DCAF's support of CSO actors in Thailand to mobilize support for better access to justice by women and LGBTIQ communities has triggered further demands for such support.

Contributions to UN Peacekeeping Operations

Some countries in the region are historically large troop contributors to UN Peace Operations (China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal), while others have provided financial assistance (China, South Korea, and Japan). This carries the potential for UN Peace Operations' training as an entry point for promoting international standards and SSG/R discussions and activities.

Nepalese Peacekeepers in the United Nations Operation in Burundi (ONUB) Special Forces from Nepal arrive in the town of Isale in the Bujumbura Rural Province of Burundi to check the security situation.
Photo: United Nations.

Increasing interest in SSG/R

Through frequent discussions among DCAF's network partners, entry points have been identified for SSG/R support by DCAF and its regional network. There is considerable need and demand for assistance, particularly in South and Southeast Asia. There are also considerable possibilities for intra-regional support. In some countries in Southeast Asia, for instance, SSG/R is now a well-known subject and the development of think tanks and other research centres focussing on various aspects of governance has steadily increased since the 2000s. Harnessing such experiences and allowing other countries to benefit from them is a key task of DCAF's network activities.

In other countries, few institutions focus on SSG/R, and the inclusion of experts in DCAF's network and activities offers opportunities to build such capacities from the ground up. In East Asia, SSG/R has been seen less as an internal challenge, and more of a development task. Nevertheless, during DCAF's engagement in the region, there has also been growing recognition of the importance of SSG/R even within one's own borders, as new threats and challenges – such as the COVID-19 pandemic – have emerged.

Regional and sub-regional cooperation

DCAF's SSG Network engagement since 2017 in Southeast Asia and engagement overall in the Asia-Pacific region have shown greater commitment amongst partner institutions to promote good security sector governance within a framework of democratic governance, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. DCAF's regional SSG network helps channel effective support and capitalize on the numerous openings for meaningful assistance, drawing on joint analyses of regional, sub-regional and national needs and opportunities.

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Instability and fragile democratization

Particularly in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania conflict-affected societies suffer from internal instability and fragile democratization processes. The sustainability of peace processes is hampered by difficulties in successfully embedding SSR efforts in peace agreements and post-conflict peacebuilding and in addressing disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of armed non-state groups, transitional justice and power-sharing among former conflict parties. Numerous young and transition/hybrid democracies, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, are faced with political instability, severe backsliding of democratic transitions (including military coups and rising authoritarianism in the context of governments' COVID-19 strategies), religious radicalization, domestic armed violence, and the rise of non-reformist and reactionary politicians who neutralize successes of previous SSR initiatives.

Weak oversight and accountability

Security institutions operate with little accountability to civilian democratic institutions because of weak oversight capacities of parliaments, independent oversight institutions, and civil society organisations. As a consequence, unaccountable police services threaten human rights and fundamental freedoms and often act with impunity. For instance, in several parts of the region security institutions play an overly dominant role in politics, strongly influenced by recent histories of military and colonial governance.

Vulnerability to disasters

Moreover, populations across the Asia-Pacific region are highly vulnerable to natural and human-made disasters, including health crises, as has been exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Negative consequences of climate change across the region further destabilize fragile societies.

Limited coordination mechanisms

Multi-agency and whole-of-government responses, including concerted actions by national security sectors as well as cross-regional cooperation, are rare and largely ineffective. Sub-regional organizations are reluctant to facilitate security – and security sector – cooperation. Most countries are wary of external influence in their domestic affairs, especially on security-related topics. Colonial experiences have triggered strong resistance to foreign intervention, which makes SSG/R

assistance a very sensitive area of interaction that requires confidence-building measures and the slow nurturing of trust. DCAF's SSG Network is designed to facilitate the latter and thus fill a particular need that may be unique: the absence of regional platforms that allow for exchanges and collaboration on security sector-related issues that may be rooted in the national context, but have cross-regional consequences.

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Emerging security challenges

The ability to respond to ongoing and emerging new challenges, ranging from maritime and cybersecurity threats to domestic violence, violent extremism, military coups, gender-based violence, and narcotics and human trafficking, and geo-political and geo-strategic regional competition, depend very heavily on effective and efficient security sectors. DCAF's sub-regional network of partners and experts helps define challenges and responses that are relevant across each sub-region, while national partners, experts and their national SSG working groups help identify needs and responses at national levels.

DCAF's approach

DCAF recognises that national actors hold the primary responsibility for undertaking SSR and focuses on accompanying national efforts and processes in a way that reinforces local ownership. When advising national authorities, DCAF always provides a comparative perspective on international norms and standards as well as existing good practice, and tailors advice to national contexts and needs. When advising international actors, DCAF encourages coordinated engagement and the inclusion of good practice in political and programmatic assistance.

DCAF prioritises building trusted partnerships with national actors, emphasises the impartial nature of its advice, applies a holistic approach to SSR, and supports all security sector actors – those providing, managing, controlling, and overseeing security. DCAF also cooperates with international actors with whom we share a common objective. The choice of concrete thematic areas, objectives, partners, and approaches is shaped through ongoing dialogue that involves the beneficiary at all stages of the process, from initial scoping, through assessment, design, steering of implementation, result monitoring, and reporting.

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The history, politics, and security challenges across the region have led DCAF to take a unique approach to engaging with Asia-Pacific partners and security sector actors. While DCAF has been involved in a limited number of country-specific projects in the region over the past several years, its recent focus has been the development of a network of SSG/R stakeholders across all sub-regions and countries, with national partner institutions and SSG working groups representing all security sector actors. The SSG Network provides opportunities to raise awareness of SSG/R principles, share best practices and exchange experiences in a way that respects the unique requirements and sensitivities in the Asia-Pacific context. The Network's objective, and that of the national SSG working groups, includes the development of national-level activities. These are initiated together with DCAF, and in consultation with other partners in the network.

DCAF's added value in the region is based particularly on its ability and capacity to provide unique assistance in a way that is compatible with and enhances existing reform activities by other organizations. DCAF's added value is also expressed by the fact that its activities are welcomed by beneficiary societies and their security sectors due to our reputation of being reliable, fair and objective. Moreover, DCAF has proven its willingness to stay engaged despite setbacks, thus enabling local actors to re-start reform processes once the political climate improves. DCAF's thematic expertise at the interface of SSG/R and business and human rights provides additional potential entry points to address challenges relating to private security and the extractives sector.

Objectives

Reaffirm the value of democratic governance in addressing current and emerging security challenges.

DCAF will promote good security sector governance across the region by maintaining a platform for debate with key national stakeholders and activities in contexts where SSG/R and democratic consolidation processes are challenged, backsliding, or even reversed. DCAF will also underline the importance of democratic governance in numerous countries that are on the path of democratization, a critical phase where security sectors can have highly destabilizing but also stabilizing effects.

Security sector management and oversight

Areas of emphasis will include addressing public mistrust of police and deteriorating police-community relations through structural reforms, as well as strengthening capacities of parliaments to legislate and oversee national security sectors, including disseminating knowledge on the legal and institutional tools for oversight, building capacities of parliamentary staff, and training members of security and defence committees.

Health crises

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, DCAF teamed up with its partners in the region to analyse the roles of security sectors in preparing for, managing, and governing health crisis responses, and supported joint response capacities by the security and

health sectors. Building on jointly developed findings and recommendations, DCAF will produce practical guidance notes for security sector actors that include general guidance for region-wide application, as well as specific guidance specific for security actors and countries.

Gender equality and security

This will be a focus in all our activities across the region. DCAF and its partners address gender bias and to transform institutional cultures at the policy, legislative and planning level to promote human rights, gender equality, and inclusivity. Some governments in the region also aim to increase not only the number of women in their national armed forces, but also the number of women in UN peace operations. This provides the opportunity to promote the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, with a focus on impacts and special needs/protections for women in security institutions, as well as the transformative power of including women in decision-making.

Support to civil society

Growing involvement of civil society organisations and media in SSG stands out as a trend, which should not be seen as a diminution of state authority, but rather as a way to increase transparency and thus state legitimacy. Engagement with and support for civil society and media promote a culture of participation that enhances the democratic nature of decision-making about security sector policies and legislation, building trust between communities and security

institutions, and will therefore be a focus for DCAF in the coming years. Not all countries can draw on home-grown SSG/R capacities. With the help of its regional SSG Network, DCAF will assist emerging national think tanks and CSOs in their effort to develop into centres of expertise on SSG/R.

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Private security

The private security industry has become a major actor in the security sector architecture, triggering the need for guidance and analysis on existing legal frameworks and policies. Development of new law, policy, and practice is also needed to respond specifically to the human rights risks posed by the work of the private security industry and to support national processes to improve oversight and accountability. Engagement with both the public and private sectors will be sought to promote responsible business conduct as part of SSG/R, considering concerns about inadequate regulation of the private security industry, extractive industries, and cybersecurity.

Enhance engagement in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

DCAF's work is founded on the intrinsic ability of SSG/R to make societies safer and more stable, promote human security and development, and alleviate injustices and tensions that might escalate to instability and armed violence. This is the case particularly in societies emerging from conflict that are politically and socially fragile and in need of security sectors that play a stabilizing role while overcoming fragility.

SSR and peace processes

In the coming years, DCAF hopes to re-engage in Myanmar, building on its long-standing contribution to the peace process by providing capacity-building on SSG/R, DDR,

federal security sectors, and related post-conflict SSG/R priorities for key stakeholders involved in negotiating the peace agreement. DCAF will also contribute to the SSR aspects of peace processes and stabilization efforts in countries including Afghanistan, Nepal, the Philippines, and Thailand.

Prevention of violent extremism

Violent extremism is a major threat, particu-larly affecting South Asia and Southeast Asia. Factors associated with radicalisation and the spread of extremism are diverse and are linked to SSG/R in that they often relate to a lack of security and ineffective or inequitable provision of justice. Prevention of violent

extremism through investments in accountable, inclusive, and representative security institutions as well as peace processes and SSR-embedded DDR programmes that defuse, not antagonize inter-ethnic relations, is therefore a priority for many partners and is an important theme of DCAF's work.

Business and security

In the area of private security, DCAF will build on and further develop its work, undertaken jointly with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), to promote security and human rights with Chinese companies operating in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. More broadly, as governments and private companies from East Asia operate in conflict and post-conflict zones, it is imperative to focus on promoting responsible business conduct.

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Strengthen SSG/R contributions to international policy and practice.

Partnerships with multilateral institutions

DCAF will raise awareness among multilateral and international actors and the donor community about the necessity to invest in SSG/R in the Asia-Pacific region and its link to national, regional, and international security. DCAF will reach out to regional organizations such as SAARC and ASEAN by actively including them in regional network activities, partner forums and efforts to strengthen regional capacities in SSG promotion. DCAF's partnership with the UN, European Union, World Bank, and other major multilateral organisations show that it is well positioned to provide relevant and timely contributions. The expertise that DCAF brings to SSG/R will be integrated into international efforts in several ways, ranging from continued influence on the development of international policies, the promulgation of evidence-based good practices in supporting SSG/R, and in specific support to guide international donor programmes and projects in the Asia-Pacific region.

Agenda 2030

SDG16 commits states to achieving peaceful and inclusive societies, providing access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. Fulfilling this goal and its targets will require states to ensure their security sectors are democratically governed. Recognizing the role SSR plays in this regard, much of DCAF's work in the Asia-Pacific region in the coming period will make a key contribution to the implementation of SDG16.

Sharing lessons learned in SSG/R

Capturing and sharing lessons from the field will be a high priority for DCAF and a valuable contribution to international policy and practice. DCAF's wide network of partners and diverse portfolio of projects facilitates the development of unique insights which can shape international policy and practice in areas such as women, peace, and security; the integration of security actors in peace processes; security sectors' roles in health crisis management; and the implementation of Agenda 2030. In the absence of active efforts by regional organizations and mechanisms to facilitate experience sharing, lessons learning and priority setting on SSG/R, DCAF's regional SSG Network will offer opportunities to do so at national, sub-regional and regional levels.

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Other thematic priorities

Several additional issues are emerging as particularly important for SSG/R in the Asia-Pacific region in the coming years and will be addressed by DCAF and its partners on an as-needed basis.

Maritime security

Maritime security is an area of cooperation and potential conflict, offering opportunities to promote the concept of maritime security sector governance.

Border management

National and transnational movement of people is common throughout the region and effective border management plays an important role in preventing human trafficking, illicit smuggling, health crises and managing the entry of persons fleeing conflict or persecution. Border management and migration is thus a significant element of the national security architecture of many countries.

Climate change and security

Countries in the region are particularly hard hit by natural disasters and this trend will only worsen with the effects of climate change. Here, disaster risk reduction offers concrete entry points for SSR and opportunities to bring together a range of security sector stakeholders, government agencies, and local communities to focus on preparedness and response strategies, particularly in countries where climate change-induced disasters threaten to further destabilize fragile and conflict-affected societies.

Cybersecurity

In an era of rising cyber capabilities among security forces, to grapple with the challenge of misinformation, disinformation, and cyber threats, there is a growing interest among partners in treating cybersecurity as an essential aspect of security sector governance.

Urban SSG/R

With growing urbanization, crime and violence have shifted towards urban centres. While important lessons have been learned on urban planning and development, less attention has been paid towards promoting urban safety and security in larger cities and municipalities, which can be an important focus for future SSG/R activities.

Implementation

Programming and financing

Building and expanding on its network of partner organizations throughout South, Southeast and East Asia, DCAF will pursue financing to continue networking activities to facilitate South-South cooperation. We will also seek support for national-level activities where DCAF's expertise can benefit security sector actors directly, or in cooperation with national partners.

Geographic coverage

Special efforts will be made to include countries not yet represented with partner institutions, experts and national SSG working groups in DCAF's Asia-Pacific SSG Network (Bhutan, Brunei, Laos and North Korea), either by inclusion in the network or by pursuing ad hoc options for SSG/R activities directly with partners in these countries. The same applies to the countries of Oceania (including the Pacific Islands), the Asia-Pacific sub-regions.

DCAF helps build networks of security sector actors and civil society groups to share experience and best practices in reform and governance at the regional and sub-regional level in Asia. Photo: DCAF

Strengthen partnerships

Partnerships with existing national-level institutions will be maintained, while efforts will be made to identify partners in countries not currently represented in DCAF's regional network. Partnerships will also be pursued with regional associations and organisations. DCAF will continue to leverage and support the efforts of its key international partners in the region, including the European Union, United Nations, and World Bank. Moreover, countries that are committed to DCAF's vision and mandate to bring security to populations

through investment in good SSG, will be actively encouraged to join DCAF's governing Foundation Council.

Staffing and deployment

Without field offices in the region, DCAF will continue to collaborate closely with local partner institutions and experts associated to its regional network initiative, unless funding levels and project necessities justify increasing DCAF's presence by either opening a field office or by financing personnel at partner institutions in order to assure in-country management and guidance.

Evolution in the context of COVID-19

Throughout the global pandemic, DCAF adapted its operations to provide the best possible support to partners in security institutions and oversight actors facing a rapidly evolving situation. E-learning and remote advising have become an increasingly important part of DCAF's offer; these forms of support will be further expanded and enhanced in the coming years. DCAF is already working with partners to capture lessons learned and identify new opportunities for SSR emerging because of responses to the pandemic. This work will remain relevant in the coming years as the effects of COVID-19 will endure.

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DCAF is dedicated to making people more secure through accountable and effective security and justice.

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