# Security Sector Reform:
# A Literature Review

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## Introduction

'Security sector reform', or SSR, has become a cornerstone of international development, post-conflict peacebuilding and state-building initiatives. The term emerged in the late 1990s in recognition of the changing international security environment and the limitations of peace accords in failing and failed states. Aimed at promoting both effective and legitimate provision of security in countries emerging from conflict or undergoing processes of political transition, SSR-related activities have growth significantly in scope as well as scale.

However, security sector reform remains a contested concept that can have different meanings in different contexts and for different audiences. Various institutions, groups and nations involved in SSR tend to understand the concept on the basis of their own policies, doctrines and practices.[1] Experience has also shown that SSR is often conducted in challenging political, socio-economic and security environments. Given the diversity of perceptions and contexts, SSR approaches and implementation vary greatly within the international community.

Against that backdrop, this contribution reviews the comprehensive literature on security sector reform. Specifically, it asks: what were the authoritative influences and actors in the development of the SSR concept? What is the current state of theoretical discussion? What challenges and opportunities does adoption of SSR entail? How successfully has the concept been adopted in international peace operations? Are there any particular criticisms of the SSR concept? How might SSR practice be improved?

## The Emergence of Security Sector Reform

SSR is a relatively new term in a vast body of literature on civilian–military relations. It was first raised in the context of development cooperation in 1998 by Clare Short – then UK Minister for International Development.[2] The concept was further developed and widely discussed among British scholars from Canada, the Netherlands and Germany.[3] As a result, there has been growing interest in the inter-

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[1]  The UNDP, for instance, developed the term 'justice and security sector reform' to emphasize that justice and security sectors are inextricably linked. While the UN Security Council and the Secretary-General refer to 'security sector reform', the OECD has introduced 'security sector system' to de-emphasize the military connotations of the former term.

[2]  See Clare Short, 'Security Sector Reform and the Elimination of Poverty', speech held at the Centre for Defence Studies, King's College in London (March 1999); DFID, *Eliminating World Poverty: A Challenge for the 21st Century* (London: 1997).

[3]  See Theodor H. Winkler, 'Managing Change: The Reform and Democratic Control of the Security Sector and International Order', *DCAF Occasional Paper*, No. 1 (October 2002), p. 5.

relationship between the institutions of a democratic state, such as the parliament and civil society groups, and the implementing agencies of the security sector, including the armed forces, the police, paramilitary units and intelligence services.

Some of the considerations that gave birth to the SSR concept date back to the beginning of the post-Cold War period. Four key factors have spurred the development of security sector reform.

*First*, the proliferation of peaceable conflict settlement. In the early 1990s, UN peacekeeping operations led to various peace agreements which mandated the establishment of transitional administrations in conflict-torn areas. In recognition of these experiences, special programmes for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants have become widely recognized as SSR-relevant in societies where conflict mediation is underway.[4]

*Second*, a wider understanding of security. Reflecting upon the failure to ensure the accountability of security forces resulted in renewed abuses in post-conflict setting – as in Rwanda and Somalia – the international community begun to reconsider the central concern of security policy, from an exclusive focus on state or regime security to embracing the welfare and protection of the population. This understanding of security is consistent with the SSR concept of 'human security' as promoted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and used by development actors.[5]

*Third*, the wave of democratization and the transformation of regional relationships. The end of military regimes in many Latin American countries and the 'second wave' of democratization on the African continent have stimulated thinking about how to bring armed forces under stable civilian control.[6] Moreover, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many European countries emerging from communism looked to the EC/EU and NATO for assistance and eventual membership – and effective and legitimate security sector reform is a prerequisite for accession to these regional groupings. In 1994, the OSCE developed a Code of Conduct on Political–Military Relations, which mainstreamed the norms of democratic control not only of the military but also of other security services in its member countries.

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[4] See Heiner Hanggi and Vincenza Scherrer, 'Towards a Common UN Approach to Security Sector Reform: Lessons Learned from Integrated Missions', *DCAF Policy Paper*, No. 25 (2007).

[5] See UNDP, *Human Development Report 1994* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[6] See Samuel P. Huntington, 'Reforming Civil–Military Relations', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1995), pp. 9–17.

*Fourth*, the emergence of the nexus between security and development. Traditionally, development actors had tended to assume that economic development as such would serve to promote peace and security. However, the conspicuous failure of aid programmes in many parts of Africa and Latin America demonstrated that this was not necessary the case. As Chart 1 shows, sustainable economic development is co-dependent on the provision of proper security as well. This security–development nexus led to the view that the absence of effective security structure under democratic control forms an intractable obstacle to sustained development. Under that logic, international donor agencies – including the OECD and the World Bank, and development ministries – such as the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) – have been actively providing assistance to enhance not only the institutional capacity of security forces, but also their accountability to the population and its elected representatives.[7]
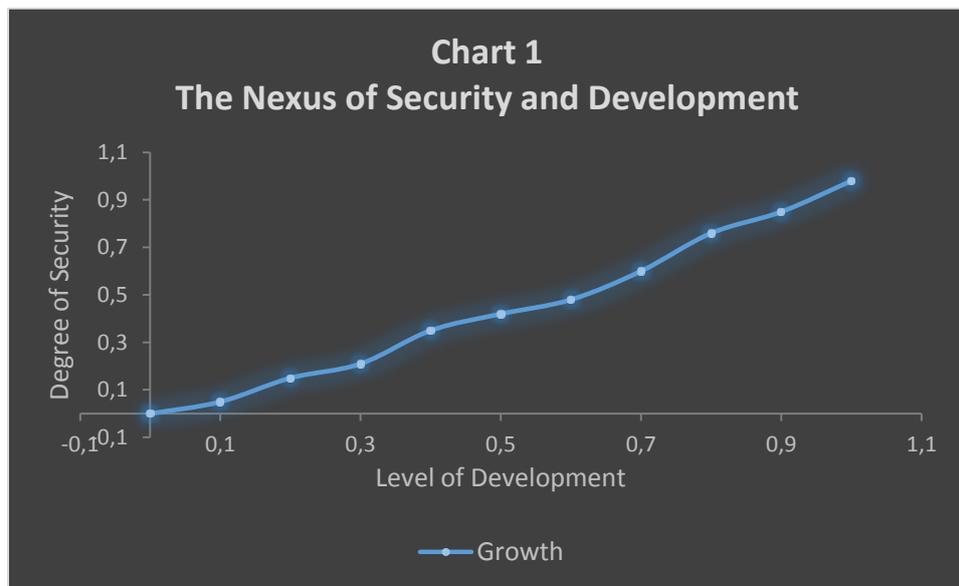


As peace and security increasingly become a public good,[8] deficits in the provision of security inevitably require SSR undertakings. Countries may embark on reforming their security sectors for a range of reasons – including the emergence of a new threat, post-conflict reconstruction, political transition from authoritarian regime to democratic governance, recent independence, a lack of accountability and

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[7]   See Michael Brzoska, 'Development Donors and the Concept of Security Sector Reform', *DCAF Occasional Paper*, No. 4 (November 2003).

[8]   See Ruben P. Mendez, 'Peace as a Global Public Good', in Inge Kaul, Isabelle Grunberg and Marc Stern, *Global Public Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 382–416.

transparency in public affairs, major disrespect for the rule of law, mismanagement of scarce resources, and poor civilian capacity to administer and monitor the security forces.[9] The growing threat of transnational terrorism and the recent popular uprisings in Middle East and Northern Africa further show that SSR is relevant not only for developing nations or societies in transition, but also needs to be a policy priority at home.[10]

## The Concept of Security Sector Reform: Definition and Agenda

Despite the world-wide practice of security sector reform, there has been no common or standard definition of the concept. In general sense, 'security sector' is associated with the set of structures, institutions and personnel responsible for the management, provision and oversight of security in a country.[11] And 'reform' describes a series of efforts to improve the way a state or governing body provides security and safety to the nation.[12]

While the meaning of 'security sector reform' is evolving, the United Nations offers a pragmatic and contextually sensitive framework for its development and application. Here, security sector reform refers to 'a process of assessment, review and implementation as well as monitoring and evaluation led by national authorities that has as its goal the enhancement of effective and accountable security for the State and its people without discrimination and with full respect for human rights and the rule of law'.[13] This definition was the result of careful and extensive consultation processes aimed at developing global norms and guidelines for the UN bodies and member states.

As the term 'security' goes beyond traditional thinking and involves wide range of actors, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) has developed a comprehensive and holistic approach to security sector reform. While the UN has retained the term 'sector' when

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9   See Herbert Wulf, 'Security Sector Reform in Developing and Transitional Countries', in Clem McCartney, Martina Fischer and Oliver Wils, eds, *Security Sector Reform: Potentials and Challenges for Conflict Transformation* (Berlin: Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management, 2004), p. 10.

10  See Albrecht Schnabel and Vanessa Farr, 'Returning to the Development Roots of Security Sector Reform', in Albrecht Schnabel and Vanessa Farr, eds, *Back to the Roots: Security Sector Reform and Development* (Munster: LIT, 2011), p. 9.

11  See Dylan Hendrickson, *A Review of Security Sector Reform* (London: Centre for Defence Studies, 1999), p. 29.

12  See Sarah Meharg and Aleisha Arnusch, 'Security Sector Reform: A Case Study Approach to Transition and Capacity Building', *SSI Papers* (January 2010), p. 3.

13  Report of the UN Secretary-General, *Securing Peace and Development: The Role of the United Nations in Supporting Security Sector Reform*, UN Doc. A/62/659-S/2008/39 (23 January 2008), para. 17.

referring to SSR, the OECD committee has introduced the concept of 'security system reform' to describe 'the transformation of the "security system" – which includes all the actors, their roles, responsibilities and actions – working together to manage and operate the system in a manner that is more consistent with democratic norms and sound principles of good governance, and thus contributes to a well-functioning security framework'.[14] This reframing offers useful elaborations on the roles and tasks of security-relevant institutions and actors.

Although every country develops its own particular security framework, the security sector generally consists of two basic actors: *First*, the key organs of government with authority to deploy force, including the military, the police, the coast guard and the intelligence community. *Secondly*, institutions with responsibilities for managing and overseeing state affairs on defence and domestic security, such as ministries, legislature bodies, think-tanks and civil society groups.[15] In addition come two other relevant actor-groups: 'non-core' security institutions (like the judiciary, customs, corrective and civil emergency services), and 'non-statutory' security forces (private security companies, militias and guerrilla armies).[16]

Many developing countries and societies in transition have undergone security sector reform. Here, the key objective of SSR has been to establish good governance in the security sector that can benefit the society as a whole and foster the creation of a safe environment at the international, national and local levels.[17] It aims specifically at strengthening civilian control and democratic oversight over the armed forces, and enhancing national capacity to develop an effective, professional and efficient security sector. In that sense, the academic and policy literatures argue that SSR-relevant agenda should cover five priority areas: promoting the rule of law; security-related policy development, planning and implementation; building the professionalism of the security forces; strengthening the oversight mechanisms of security institutions; and improving the management of security sector expenditures.[18]

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[14]  OECD, *Security System Reform and Governance* (Paris: OECD, 2005), p. 20.

[15]  See Tim Huxley, 'Reforming Southeast Asia's Security Sectors', *CDS Working Papers* (April 2001), p. 5.

[16]  See Nicole Ball and Michael Brzoska, 'Voice and Accountability in the Security Sector', *BICC Paper*, No. 21 (July 2002), p. 8.

[17]  See Nicole Ball, 'Good Practices in Security Sector Reform', in Herbert Wulf, ed., *Security Sector Reform* (Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion, 2000), p. 14.

[18]  See Nicole Ball, Tsjeard Bouta, Luc de Goor, *Enhancing Democratic Governance of the Security Sector: An Institutional Assessment Framework* (The Hague: The

On the ground, security sector reform covers a wide range of programmes, from facilitation, consultation or coordination to direct implementation. The SSR agenda has been translated into extensive activities within five broad categories: overarching activities for agenda setting and strategic planning in the security sector; activities aimed at restructuring and reforming the national security establishment; activities aimed at strengthening civilian control and democratic oversight; activities related to SSR in the post-conflict setting; and activities on cross-cutting issues (see Table 1).

Table 1. SSR-Related Activities

| Overarching activities for agenda setting and strategic planning | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| (e.g. security sector reviews, need assessments, development of SSR strategies and national security policies) | | |
| Activities related to security and justice providing institutions | Activities related to civilian control and democratic oversight | SSR activities in post-conflict settings |
| Defence reform Intelligence reform Police reform Judiciary reform Prison reform | Ministerial-level management Parliamentary oversight Judicial review Ombudsman evaluation Civil society oversight | Disarmament, demobilization and reconstruction Firearms control Mine disposal Transitional justice |
| Activities on cross-cutting issues | | |
| (gender equality, child protection, etc.) | | |

Source: Adapted from Heiner Hanggi and Vincenza Scherrer, 'Recent Experience of UN Integrated Missions in Security Sector Reform', in Heiner Hanggi and Vincenza Scherrer, eds, *Security Sector Reform and UN Integrated Missions: Experience from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti and Kosovo* (Munster: LIT, 2008), p. 15.

SSR practices vary from country to country, given the unique contexts and different challenges. Some academics have identified a number of ideal conditions for a constructive and sustained security sector reform. These include a relatively safe environment, a common vision of reform priorities, shared understanding of constitutional prerogatives, strong political leadership, sustainable commitment to assume institutional responsibilities, participation in reform programmes, willingness to share risks, the availability of basic political and economic infrastructures, capable and well-informed civil society organizations, cohesive regional constellations, and political astuteness of international donor

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Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Clingendael Institute of International Relations, 2003), pp. 33–34.

community.[19] In sum, the sustainability of SSR is highly dependent on deep-rooted support among relevant stakeholders.

## The Prospect and Challenges of Security Sector Reform

Recent experiences in many countries have underscored some key enablers for the adoption of SSR. *First*, the signing of peace accords has been an entry point for SSR in many places, such as Congo, Nepal and Sri Lanka. *Second*, the rising rates of organized crime and economic recession provide another impetus to initiate SSR in many countries – including Colombia and Morocco. *Third*, international cooperation and assistance have played a positive role in the planning and application of SSR. In the case of Central and East European countries, enthusiasm for SSR was driven by the motivation of bolstering good governance in the security sector, but also by the prospect that national leaders could cooperate on the definition and realization of the country's foreign and security policy. *Fourth*, the voluntary participation of local stake-holders is critical for SSR implementation. In the Indonesian experience, security actors have appeared enthusiastic and willing to take part in SSR programmes tailored to their operational needs and the country's socio-political realities. *Fifth*, despite their exclusion from decision-making processes, the preparedness of civil society groups to exercise an oversight role is important for raising awareness in conflict prevention and promoting the rule of law and human rights protection.[20]

Attempts to operationalize the SSR agenda have never been a smooth undertaking. Every society has its own particular structures, priorities and experiences of conflict. There are many obstacles that may obstruct successful implementation of reforms on the ground. Some of these can be anticipated – such as ill-conceived peace agreements, impunity of past human rights abuses, ongoing structural violence, the proliferation of firearms, a lack of international assistance and programme coherence, vested interests of donors and their limited knowledge of local dynamics. Other unforeseen impediments will continue to undermine SSR undertakings – including peace spoilers, transitional or unstable politics, inconsistent national policies, low socio-economic capital, endemic corruption, continuing physical abuses of the local population, limited access to information, absence of a culture of good governance, and under-performance of civil society groups.[21]

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[19] See Alan Bryden and Heiner Hanggi, eds, *Security Governance in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding* (Munster: LIT, 2005), pp. 29, 33–39; David M. Law, 'The Post-Conflict Security Sector', *DCAF Policy Paper*, No. 14 (June 2006), pp. 12–15.

[20] See Hans Born, 'Security Sector Reform in Challenging Environments: Insights from Comparative Analysis', in Hans Born and Albrecht Schnabel, eds, *Security Sector Reform in Challenging Environment* (Munster: LIT, 2009), pp. 241–265.

[21] See Jane Chanaa, 'Security Sector Reform: Issues, Challenges and Prospects', *Adelphi Paper* No. 344 (2002), pp. 33–60; Albrecht Schnabel and Hans-Georg

While it is exceptionally difficult to generalize the necessary steps in conducting SSR, the prospect of reform in different contexts is theoretically measureable on a scale of potentials. According to Herbert Wulf, the central preconditions for successful implementation of SSR are two: the willingness of national stakeholders to pursue reforms, and the nature of the situation in specific countries.[22] We may speak of six categories of countries with differing degrees of security: nations at war; areas of tension with high probability of war; failed or collapsed states; societies undergoing conflict mediation; countries emerging from authoritarianism; societies in transition to peace; and post-conflict societies. Chart 2 shows that the more harmless or safer the environment, the greater is the willingness to accept a re-orientation of security sector. Conversely, societies with higher degrees of violence are less inclined to take necessary steps for reform. In sum, SSR is more likely to be adopted in countries that are relatively stable and/or less affected by violent conflicts.



**Chart 2**
**The Prospect of Security Sector Reform**
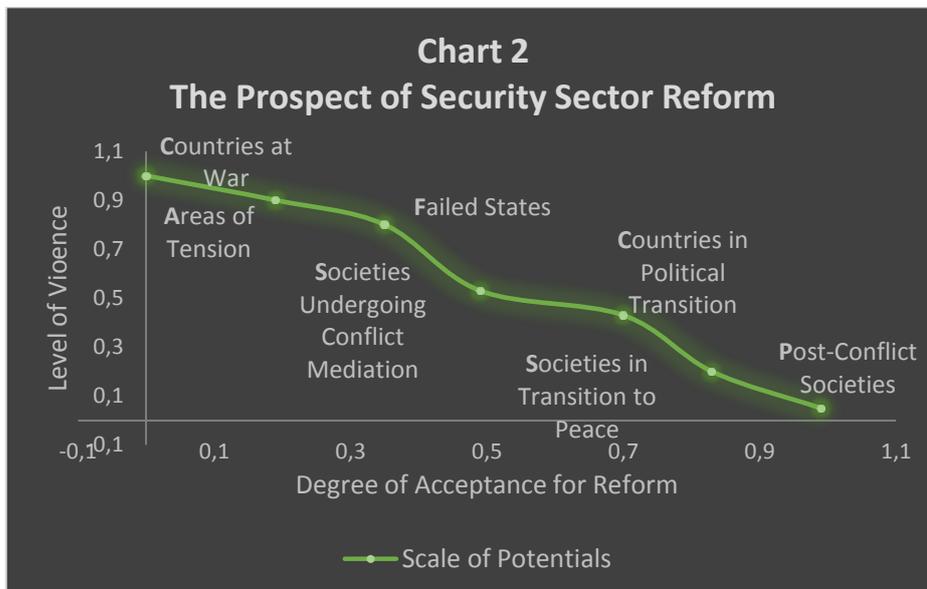
## Security Sector Reform and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding

In the context of post-conflict peacebuilding, security sector reform lies at the core of discussions related to the ways and means of ensuring a viable peace. Most certainly, a mismanaged and dysfunctional security sector will lead to crisis-related tensions and recurrence of armed conflicts. The adoption of an SSR agenda offers multifaceted opportunities for post-conflict peacebuilding. By seeking to counter a culture of impunity on human rights abuses, SSR implementation entails the

Ehrhart, 'Post-Conflict Societies and the Military: Challenges and Problems of Security Sector Reform', in Albrecht Schnabel and Hans-Georg Ehrhart, eds, *Security Sector Reform and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2005) pp. 1–16.

[22] Wulf (2004), p. 13.

promotion and facilitation of democratic oversight over security institutions. In the economic sphere, it can ensure a proper allocation and cost-effective consumption of national resources in the security sector. Moreover, professionalized security institutions and personnel are deliberately committed to ensuring the provision of the population's physical security from external and internal threats.[23]

Thus, approaching SSR as part of a comprehensive and inclusive peacebuilding strategy is of utmost importance for the consolidation of peace and development. Since 2008, the UN has made notable progress in the area of security sector reform. All UN member states have engaged in SSR-related discussions through platforms, such as the Peacebuilding Commission, the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, and the Group of Friends of Security Sector Reform, where proposals and recommendations for improving UN work on SSR are exchanged. Through recent peacekeeping operations and peacebuilding tasks, the Security Council has provided relevant supports to SSR efforts in many places – including Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone. UN Headquarters has also strengthened inter-agency coherence and coordination through mechanisms like the Security Sector Reform Task Force and the Security Sector Reform Unit.[24] The Peacebuilding Fund further offers the potential of ensuring more predictable and sustained funding for the UN to support SSR programmes.

Despite a widespread consensus on the importance of security sector reform for the consolidation of peace and development, the international community has remained cautious. SSR has been misunderstood as, *inter alia,* a 'Northern-imposed' and 'donor-driven' concept.[25] Concerns over intervention in domestic affairs have led to an emphasis on the sovereign right of each country to undertake reforms in its own security sector. Russia and India, for instance, have warned that excessive external pressure and heavy mentoring of the general SSR vision will be controversial and counterproductive for the reform process.[26] Similarly, China has underlined that international assistance

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[23] See Michael Brzoska, 'The Concept of Security Sector Reform', in Herbert Wulf, ed., *Security Sector Reform* (Bonn: BICC, 2000), p. 6; Herbert Wulf, *Security Sector Reform in Developing Countries* (Eschborn: GTZ, 2000), p. 8.

[24] See Report of the Secretary General, *Securing States and Societies: Strengthening the United Nations Comprehensive Support to Security Sector Reform*, UN Doc. A/67/970-S/2013/480 (13 August 2013).

[25] See Albrecht Schnabel, 'Ideal Requirements versus Real Environments in Security Sector Reform', in Hans Born and Albrecht Schnabel, eds., *Security Sector Reform in Challenging Environments* (Munster: LIT, 2009), p. 25.

[26] See Meeting Record of the United Nations Security Council, UN Doc. S/PV.7161 (28 April 2014), p. 10, 26.

requires the concurrence of the recipient states and must meet the specific needs and situations of the individual country.[27]

Further, scepticism is often related to the ambitious application of security sector reform. In post-conflict settings, SSR entails complex, difficult and often very risky decisions. In states undergoing political transition, there is no magic formula for immediately ending the structural problems and culture of impunity in the security sector. Many countries – including Brazil, Indonesia and Turkey – have stressed that security sector reform is a long-term process that requires a deep understanding of socio-political realities, to enable a comprehensive strategy for implementing the SSR agenda with mechanisms for mitigating risks.[28]

Overall, there is strong agreement within the international community that 'national ownership' is a key requirement for successful and sustainable SSR in post-conflict peacebuilding.[29] The challenge here is not how conceptualize national ownership, but how to operationalize it in a manner that can fully guarantee that SSR remains a demand-driven process. Solutions in the field of security sector can be viable only if they are applied within a comprehensive framework of peacebuilding. Here, international support to SSR must be anchored in broader state-building efforts aimed at addressing root causes of conflicts and developing national capacities for dealing with multi-dimensional threats.

Moreover, as the challenges and opportunities of security sector reform are regional in nature, governments have recognized the role of regional organizations and bilateral actors as increasingly important in SSR implementation.[30] A clear example here is the African Union and its activities involving intra-regional exchanges on security sector reform. In Southeast Asia, there have been regular consultations, includeing an international workshop facilitated by Indonesia in 2010 with SSR as a major topic of discussion.

## Concluding Remarks

SSR is a normative concept aimed not only at increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of security institutions, but also at improving the governance of the security sector in line with democratic norms and

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[27] See Meeting Record of the United Nations Security Council, (2014), p.19.

[28] See Meeting Record of the United Nations Security Council, UN Doc. S/PV.7161 (Resumption 1) (28 April 2014), pp. 2, 12.

[29] See Timothy Donais, 'Understanding Local Ownership in Security Sector Reform', in Timothy Donais, ed., *Local Ownership and Security Sector Reform* (Munster: LIT, 2008); Statement by the President of the Security Council, UN Doc. S/PRST/2008/14 (12 May 2008).

[30] See UN Security Council Resolution 2151, UN Doc. S/Res/2151 (28 April 2008).

values. SSR is a multi-purpose concept that is necessarily context-specific and requires a comprehensive approach that includes most aspects of governance. SSR implementation must be integrated in order to optimize the capacities of the sectors involved, while shaping the environment for sustainable success over the long term. The prospects for SSR lie in key tenets like *legitimacy* and *national ownership*. Commitment to SSR is a long-term matter, and one that will require sustainable commitment and substantial resources from relevant stakeholders if the desired outcomes are to be achieved.