National Security Policies

Formulating national security policies for good security sector governance

About this series

The SSR Backgrounders provide concise introductions to topics and concepts in good security sector governance (SSG) and security sector reform (SSR). The series summarizes current debates, explains key terms and exposes central tensions based on a broad range of international experiences. The SSR Backgrounders do not promote specific models, policies or proposals for good governance or reform but do provide further resources that will allow readers to extend their knowledge on each topic. The SSR Backgrounders are a resource for security governance and reform stakeholders seeking to understand but also to critically assess current approaches to good SSG and SSR.

About this SSR Backgrounder

This SSR Backgrounder is about the role of national security policies in good security sector governance (SSG). National security policies are high-level documents that establish the overarching priorities and values that guide state security provision, management and oversight. For this reason national security policies are also necessary for effective SSR. This backgrounder explains how formulating a national security policy can contribute to good SSG.

This SSR Backgrounder answers the following questions:

- What is a national security policy? *Page 2*
- How do national security policies contribute to good SSG? *Page 4*
- What are the main steps in formulating a national security policy? *Page 5*
- What are the key challenges in formulating a national security policy? *Page 8*
- How are national security policies linked to SSR? *Page 9*

DCAF
a centre for security, development and the rule of law

What is a national security policy?

A national security policy is an official description of how a state aims to provide for its own security and that of its population: it establishes a national understanding of the threats and risks of the security environment, and the values and principles that will guide the state in providing state and human security. It is intended to provide an overarching national vision as the basis for the development of other documents such as a national security strategy or subsector plans. A national security policy can take the form of a single document, but it can also be reflected in a collection of existing documents that together compose a coherent integrated policy. A national security policy is defined by the purpose it serves and not by its title: it might also be called a plan, strategy, concept, doctrine or similar.

A national security policy is a guide to action for the government: it is not a law but its implementation may require changes in the legal framework that governs security provision, management and oversight. **A national security policy offers an opportunity to apply the principles of good governance to the security sector.**

National security policies consider national interests and values, governance structures and decision-making processes and usually culminate in a long-term vision of state and human security in the future. **A national security policy should reflect not only the point of view of the current government and other state institutions, but also those of the men and women of the population whose views are sought through democratic representation or public consultation.** A national security policy may be drafted ad hoc as need arises or it may be legally required, for example according to a constitution or as a result of ratification of an international agreement.

A national security policy usually includes the elements shown in Figure 1.

Good security sector governance (SSG) and security sector reform (SSR) **Good SSG describes** how the principles of good governance apply to public security provision. The principles of good governance are accountability, transparency, rule of law, participation, responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency. Good SSG is thus a normative standard for how the state security sector should work in a democracy.

The **security sector** is composed of all the structures, institutions and personnel responsible for security provision, management and oversight at national and local levels. Good SSG means that the security sector provides state and human security, effectively and accountably, within a framework of democratic civilian control, rule of law and respect for human rights.

Establishing good SSG is the goal of **security sector reform.** SSR is the political and technical process of improving state and human security by making security provision, management and oversight more effective and more accountable, within a framework of democratic civilian control, rule of law, and respect for human rights. SSR may focus on only one part of the security sector or the way the entire system functions, as long as the goal is always to improve both effectiveness and accountability.

For more information on these core definitions, please refer to the SSR Backgrounders on "Security Sector Governance", "Security Sector Reform" and "The Security Sector".

Figure 1 **Typical elements of a national security policy**

Vision and goals

A clear and realistic description of the conditions for national security a state aims to establish over a specific period in the near future, and the goals and intended outcomes the policy seeks to achieve as a result.

Values and principles

A statement of the values and principles that should guide the implementation of the strategy, including international obligations such as respect for human rights and gender equality.

National interest and strategic environment

A description of the state's security priorities based on domestic context, priorities and obligations.

International obligations

A national perspective on international security and cooperation, including multilateral obligations and international legal commitments.

Current and future threats, risks, challenges and opportunities

A broad assessment of potential internal and external factors that may cause harm, loss or damage to vital interests, or prevent the implementation of the policy.

How do national security policies contribute to good SSG?

A national security policy based on the principles of good SSG provides a sound basis for state and human security. One of the most important benefits of a national security policy can be the shared vision for security that is generated as a result of drafting such a policy. Having a shared vision for security articulated in a national security policy promotes consistency in decision-making and helps to prioritize among varied interests and objectives.

A national security policy serves five main purposes in the context of good SSG:

- ***Defines a broad vision for national security which is responsive to people's diverse needs.*** National security policies require a thorough analysis of all threats to state and human security based on the input of all security-relevant government actors, as well as non-state actors such as civil society groups, and ideally also international actors. National security policies provide an opportunity to address internal and external security challenges in a single forum.

- ***Provides guidance for effective policy implementation.*** National security policies allow policy responses and operational decisions by diverse actors to align to a core vision of short- and long-term goals. A national security policy thus increases the effectiveness of the security sector by optimizing contributions from all security actors through a centralized policy-making process: this is especially important when threats require responses from a broad array of actors within and outside the security sector.

- ***Enhances security sector efficiency and accountability.*** A national security policy allows better use of resources according to shared values and objectives, while avoiding duplications and minimizing inconsistencies. This requires security spending to be realistic and sustainable, and to be balanced against other national priorities. A national security policy also enhances accountability by providing a clear benchmark against which performance can be measured.

- ***Builds domestic consensus on security provision.*** A consultative national security policy-making process promotes national dialogue and cooperation across different professional, public, political and subsector groups, and such discussion can promote consensus on core values of state security provision, management and oversight. Such transparent and participatory approaches have the potential to enhance public confidence in state security provision.

- ***Enhances regional and international confidence and cooperation.*** A coherent, transparent and publicly shared national security policy sends a message to regional and international partners about a state's values, concerns and intentions in security and defence, and often charts specific intentions for regional or international cooperation: this open communication can prevent conflict and facilitate international cooperation.

What are the main steps in formulating a national security policy?

There are no universal blueprints for formulating a national security policy and every policy must reflect its own specific context, but in general a national security policy is formed over four distinct steps: initiation; consultation and drafting; review and reconciliation; approval and dissemination (see Figure 2).

Initiation. A national security policy process may be initiated by the executive following a policy decision, or may be the result of a legal requirement or the outcome of a review of a previous policy cycle. The process might happen regularly every several years, or at occasional intervals as deemed necessary by the current government or dictated by law. It is good practice in planning for a new national security policy to start with a feasibility study to agree on the scope and methodology of the policy formation process, allocate human and financial resources and raise public awareness.

Consultation and drafting. The executive usually appoints an *ad hoc* committee or tasks an existing body with planning consultations and/or drafting the national security policy. Specialized security advisory bodies, such as parliamentary committees or national security councils, may play this role because they benefit from experience, institutional support and a security-focused mandate, but independent non-government experts may also be involved. The committee may be responsible for conducting consultations and needs assessments, commissioning background papers and external expert studies on relevant topics, as well as writing and reviewing successive drafts and reconciling feedback to produce the final version of the policy. Appointing a technically competent and representative drafting committee at an early stage enhances the process.

Figure 2 Four steps in formulating a national security policy

Broad consultation helps to make national security policies inclusive and legitimate, and can also facilitate implementation.

National security policies are enhanced by input from:

- *governmental security actors* such as ministries of defence and interior, intelligence agencies, representatives of the armed forces, legislative committees and financial management bodies;

- *ministries not conventionally associated with the security sector,* such as foreign affairs, development, economics, agriculture, transport, health and immigration;

- *non-governmental actors,* such as opposition political parties, media, women's groups, civil society organizations, academia and independent technical experts;

- *the public,* because consultation improves the legitimacy of the process and the policy and makes the policy more responsive to real security needs – extending consultation beyond elected representatives also allows for input of underrepresented groups such as gender, ethnic or religious minorities.

For more on gender equality and security policy, please see the SSR Backgrounders on "Gender Equality and Good Security Sector Governance" and "Gender Equality and Security Sector Reform".

National security strategies A national security policy is different from a national security strategy, although sometimes the terms are used interchangeably. A national security policy is a general description that sets priorities and goals for security provision; a national security strategy describes how the goals set in a national security policy can be achieved. A national security strategy is a practical document (or set of documents) that details the necessary instruments to implement a national security policy, how these instruments should be employed over a longer period of time and how they should be used together in order to avoid duplication and make the best use of resources. In sum, a national security strategy describes how to implement a national security policy.

Review and reconciliation. A process of reconciliation is the final part of the drafting process, bringing all the input from earlier drafts and consultations together to develop and review a final draft of the national security policy. Inclusive consultation can reveal many distinct views on national security, and it is the role of the drafting committee to synthesize these differing visions into a coherent approach to state security provision for all men, women, girls and boys as well as the state. This can be achieved by circulating initial drafts of the policy during the consultation and drafting process, either internally, publicly, or by a combination of both. A two-phased approach can also help to reconcile diverse inputs into national security policy: first, a broad and inclusive public consultation generates non-binding suggestions for the national security policy, and then a government drafting committee can draw on these suggestions in producing and finalizing its own draft.

Approval and dissemination. The body that mandated a draft national security policy (usually the executive) must approve the policy before it can be implemented. Parliament's legal approval of a national security policy is not required in every political system, but the legitimacy of a national security policy always increases if it is voluntarily approved by a democratically elected legislature. Parliamentary approval of a national security policy also raises public awareness of the policy, and may be an important element of a coherent strategy for communication and dissemination of the new policy. For these reasons, an executive might voluntarily submit a new national security policy to parliament for consideration, debate, amendment or approval. Different parliaments have different roles in national security policy-making: in some systems, parliaments have the power to make substantive changes to a national security policy before approving it; in other cases parliaments may only acknowledge a new policy without making amendments; and quite often parliament has no role at all in approving a new national security policy, or does so only at the discretion of the executive.

For more on the roles and responsibilities of parliaments in good governance of the security sector, please see the SSR Backgrounder "Parliaments".

Once a national security policy is formulated and approved, it needs to be implemented. Since a national security policy is a general and high-level document that does not offer detailed solutions on how to translate its goals into practice, implementing it involves detailed assessments of existing capacity to respond to the priorities and threats the policy identifies. Policy reviews for each subsector actor involved with implementation as well as broad legislative reviews are often necessary. Establishing a review mechanism to oversee, monitor and evaluate the implementation of a national security policy helps to identify gaps.

There is also a need to constantly review the relevance of the policy in light of actual capabilities and the latest threat assessments. National security reviews contribute to the full cycle of the policy process, and may lead to the decision to draft a new national security policy. Some countries attribute this task to an institutionalised body such as the national security council; others foresee regular meetings by an *ad hoc* interdepartmental review group or a multi-stakeholder network of experts; others establish standing groups for this purpose. Parliaments also have a responsibility to ensure the national security policy is implemented and respected.

What are the key challenges in formulating a national security policy?

Balancing conventional and unconventional threats. A wide range of threats should be considered in a national security policy, recognizing the fact that threats can come from many quarters and that different groups within the population experience threats differently, for example based on gender, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status or locality. Typical examples include interstate and internal conflict, terrorism and transnational crime, but also economic and social threats to state and society such as gender-based or racially or religiously motivated violence, high levels of armed violence or economic instability. The threat environment should be constantly monitored by a standing group responsible for evaluating implementation of the national security policy.

Balancing openness and secrecy in national security policy-making. National security policy-making involves sensitive information that could make a state vulnerable, and for this reason some secrecy may be required in the drafting process. However, the external and internal confidence-building effects of a national security policy depend on open and public communication and a transparent process of formulation. Some states try to balance these concerns by using vague language (so-called strategic ambiguity), or by drafting both classified and public versions of their national security policy, but these approaches may undermine the legitimacy and confidence-building effect of the formulation process and the policy that results. An alternative approach is to make national security policy a subject of public debate about general security goals and values, while leaving details of implementation to subordinate strategies or other planning mechanisms where operational secrecy is appropriate.

Balancing the costs and benefits of the review process. National security policies are costly in human and financial resources, and they often mandate strategic changes for the security sector that can be disruptive to implement in the short term. Reviewing national security policy too frequently strains the resources and effectiveness of the security sector, but periodic reviews are necessary – especially when the strategic environment changes or if current security policy is deemed inadequate. The best way to identify reliably when a review of national security policy is appropriate is to include ongoing monitoring in national security policy implementation.

Balancing public debate with expert inputs. Public debate improves the popular legitimacy of a national security policy and also helps to make it more responsive to the diverse security needs of men, women, girls and boys. However, the views of the public must be complemented with independent expert analysis and technical competency from within the security sector and beyond. If public debate about security issues becomes controversial, there is a risk that consensus and the legitimacy of the policy will be undermined by the perception that particular political or sectoral interests control the agenda. Transparency in the formulation process and a comprehensive communication strategy can foster an atmosphere of debate and consensus that will help to balance these concerns.

Balancing policy formulation with implementation: While a national security policy by definition needs to be ambitious and set out a broad vision for national security, the policy will only make a difference if it is implemented down the line. This means the drafting process must take account of future opportunities to ensure implementation. This may require including a clause on the need to subsequently develop a national security strategy or plan to operationalise the broad vision set out in the policy. The drafting process should also consider how much detail is required at the policy stage and how much leverage should be left for those who will seek to operationalise it through the development of strategies and subsector plans. Efforts to engage with those who will ultimately implement the policy are also essential in policy formulation.

How are national security policies linked to SSR?

National security policies set out national priorities for state and human security and the capacities required to meet those priorities, and this means national security policy can be linked to SSR in two different ways:

- In a context where a national security policy is developed or revised as part of a broader political process, SSR may be required to implement the policy and to achieve its goals;

- in a context where SSR has already been identified as a national priority, such as a country emerging from crisis or transitioning to a new political system, a new national security policy is usually required in order to create a comprehensive vision for state and human security that can guide reform.

SSR can be holistic even while focusing on just one part of the security sector at a time, but this is only possible if there is an overarching framework establishing the principles, values and goals of state and human security provision. **SSR cannot be effective in isolation from other national security strategies and priorities. For this reason, a well-formulated national security policy, based on a national security needs assessment, is a crucial policy tool for SSR.**

For more information on SSR, please see the SSR Backgrounder "Security Sector Reform".

Further resources

For further details on the national security policy-making process:

- UN SSR Taskforce
  United Nations Support to National Security Policy- and Strategy-Making Processes
  in Security Sector Reform Integrated Technical Guidance Notes (United Nations, 2012, pp. 117–146).

- Bård Knudsen
  Developing a National Security Policy/Strategy: A Roadmap
  S + F: Sicherheit und Frieden/Security and Peace 3, 2012, pp. 135–140.

- Peter Albrecht and Karen Barnes
  Tool 8: National Security Policy-Making and Gender
  in Gender and Security Sector Reform Toolkit, Megan Bastick and Kristin Valasek (eds) (Geneva: DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, UN-INSTRAW, 2008).

- International Working Group on National Security
  The Policy Process
  Global Policy Brief 3, 2011.

For examples of international legal instruments relevant to gender equality and national security policy-making:

- United Nations General Assembly
  Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
  18 December 1979 (United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1249, p. 13).

- United Nations
  Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action
  adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women
  27 October 1995.

- United Nations Security Council
  Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) (on Women, Peace and Security)
  31 October 2000, S/RES/1325 (2000).

More DCAF SSR resources

- DCAF publishes a wide variety of tools, handbooks and guidance on all aspects of SSR and good SSG, available free-for-download at **www.dcaf.ch**
  Many resources are also available in languages other than English.

- The DCAF-ISSAT Community of Practice website makes available a range of online learning resources for SSR practitioners at **http://issat.dcaf.ch**

The **Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF)** is an international foundation whose mission is to assist the international community in pursuing good governance and reform of the security sector. DCAF develops and promotes norms and standards, conducts tailored policy research, identifies good practices and recommendations to promote democratic security sector governance, and provides in- country advisory support and practical assistance programmes.

DCAF wishes to thank
Petra Gurtner for production and design;
Cherry Ekins for copy editing in English;
Lynda Chenaf for copy editing in French;
Linda Machata for translation into French; and
Fernando Colaço for app development.

Series editor
Fairlie Chappuis

To cite this publication
Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, "National Security Policies", SSR Backgrounder Series (Geneva: DCAF, 2015).

© DCAF. SSR Backgrounders are available free of charge from www.dcaf.ch. Users may copy and distribute this material provided that DCAF is credited. Not for commercial use.

DCAF

a centre for security,
development and
the rule of law

Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control
of Armed Forces (DCAF)
P. O. Box 1360
CH-1211 Geneva 1
Switzerland

Read the SSR Backgrounders online or
download the free SSR Backgrounders app
for smartphones and tablets at
www.ssrbackgrounders.org