National Strategy and Security Sector Reform in Southeast Europe

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Though no silver bullets, well-crafted national strategy documents remain a key to successful security sector reform in South East Europe. The upcoming year 2007 presents an especially significant window for the introduction or revision of national security, national military, and related strategies across the region as a whole.

Some skepticism and even criticism of a focus on formal documents in this sphere should be acknowledged upfront. The most cynical view holds the stress on strategy development as at core a ruse aimed at full-employment for international "experts" and contractors. More serious lines of argument stress practical difficulties, still particularly acute in much of South East Europe, such as limited personnel and other administrative capacity or deep societal divisions retarding needed consensus. Under such conditions, insistence on new formal strategies can simply serve as another reason or excuse for inaction on more tangible steps to revamp security sector institutions.

These latter concerns need to be taken seriously and should inject a reasoned pragmatism into strategy promotion. As usual, the specific circumstances of individual countries should be taken into account. Strategy should not become a fetish that blocks otherwise promising initiatives that can build momentum for reform from the bottom up. Nonetheless, the broadening nature of security challenges in the twenty-first century increasingly calls for integrated responses both among a widening array of government agencies and a diverse set of international partners.

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[1]   The viewpoints expressed here are solely those of the author.

Beyond a certain threshold, formal strategies hold a number of advantages over ad hoc, piecemeal approaches and greatly improve the chances for successful, sustained advancement of security reform.

First, the disciplining effect of "putting it in writing" pushes the top leadership of a country or ministry to clarify key assumptions, priorities, and trade-offs concerning their objectives and the measures to achieve them.

Second, as expressions of leadership intent strategies at minimum set boundaries for bureaucratic competition and ideally serve to guide and coordinate the detailed work of separate ministries, departments, and agencies.

Third, they can provide a medium for legislatures to exercise their complementary roles in overseeing and shaping security policy.

Fourth, open strategies can also promote democratic accountability and the development of awareness and expertise on security matters within society. This is especially the case regarding specialists from higher education or research institutions, industry and business, other NGOs, and the media.

Last but not least, documents communicate priorities and intentions to foreign governments and other external audiences, highlighting areas for potential cooperation or management of differences. NATO in particular has made integrated security and military strategies de facto membership requirements. As general indicators of security sector maturation, strategies also fit with recent EU Presidencies' focus on reform in this area.

These benefits are not automatic. Ensuring positive effects that justify the effort involved requires getting both process and substance more than less "right." Individual strategies' strongpoints and shortcomings vary in this regard. To a greater or lesser extent, however, the following five points apply to nearly all.

First is the issue of timing. Almost all the countries of the region are "due" for new security strategies and subordinate documents in the next twelve to eighteen months. Some (such as Serbia[2]) have yet to adopt their first such basic documents. Several others (such as Croatia, Macedonia, and Slovenia) retain strategies from early in the decade already past or fast reaching the end of their useful shelf life. As a rule of thumb, national strategies should be re-evaluated and revised at least every four years given the passage of time, political turnover, and significant security developments. Recent or impending events such as the separation of Serbia and Montenegro in summer 2006, anticipated signals on NATO membership for the three MAP countries and on PfP for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia from the alliance's November summit in Riga, EU accession for Romania and Bulgaria in January 2007, and approaching United Nations action on the status of Kosovo all reinforce this point.

Along with the general message that the countries of the region should not wait too long to update strategies, special mention is warranted of one that introduced its strategy too soon. Montenegro adopted its security strategy on June 20, four weeks after its referendum on independence. The country had already functioned as a largely separate entity under the loose state union with Serbia and wanted to emphasize its new full statehood and Euro-Atlantic aspirations as quickly as possible. Still, it would have been better to wait until after parliamentary elections in September provided a fresh political mandate.

This raises the second general point, the need to balance breadth of participation with coherent guidance and coordination in strategy development. Even the highest level security strategy documents can still be the exclusive preserve of small teams within Ministries of Defense or Presidential or Prime Ministerial offices. Worse, though the trend appears to be passing, several countries' early security and military strategies were in large part ghost-written by outside contractors.

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[2] Advisors to Serbian President Boris Tadic reportedly completed a draft security strategy in October 2006; http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?yyyy=2006&mm=10&dd=11&nav_category=90.

Bearing in mind that the process can be as or more important than the finished product, at a minimum other concerned ministries such as Foreign Affairs and Interior should be involved. As suggested above, it can also be profitable to include parliament and its committees as well as non-governmental experts in formal or informal roles. Though opening the drafting to messier bargaining, inclusiveness offers two key potential benefits. First, more minds at work means increased chances for creative ideas to be proposed as well as for poor ones to be reconsidered. Second, even if the end product is less elegant,[3] an inclusive process can raise the sense of shared identification with and commitment to the finished strategy in a way that enhances effort for its actual implementation.

A third issue concerns strategies' evaluation of the security environment confronting South East Europe. This is generally a strong point. Across the region most documents, including military strategies, lay out realistic, comprehensive assessments of prevailing challenges. Emphasis goes to "non-traditional" threats such as transnational crime, corruption, economic fragility, and inter-communal tensions over conventional military attacks as the most pressing issues for their countries.

Even here, however, greater clarification and prioritization would be useful. For instance, in addressing terrorism, a real issue for the region, strategies could go further beyond general alignment with international concern to weigh specific ways it may concern them directly in terms of possible attacks and/or of al Qaedist or other affiliates residing on or transiting their territory.

Progress on the preceding point would also spillover to a fourth. Many documents share a common weakness of failing to move beyond articulation of general aspirations to specification of tangible policy measures to achieve them. Too often, emphasis on full membership in NATO and the European Union is not followed by description of priority measures, necessary areas for preparation, or even reference to separately issued accession strategies or agreements. Although understandably limited for countries still on the outside, strategy

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[3]   As the saying goes, "a camel is a horse designed by a committee".

documents might also do more to outline in broad terms countries' viewpoints on further development of these and other key international institutions as well as of the division-of-labor and relations among them.[4] Likewise, military strategies' invocation of the need for modernization and inter-service jointness can remain unaccompanied by realistic, prioritized steps toward these goals. The relationship among various entities involved in intelligence collecting and analysis is also often underspecified.

Regional relations present a fifth and final point. Strategies typically acknowledge the importance of peaceful coexistence and friendly interaction with the other countries of South East Europe. However, often little or no attention is devoted to specific issues in bilateral relations with individual neighbors or to the respective roles of the seemingly endless number of sub-regional initiatives and frameworks to advance cooperation. Finally, several countries' documents or drafts contain references to "external minorities," ethnic co-nationals outside the borders of the "mother country" in which the group is the majority. Here drafters must take care to avoid exaggerated or ambiguous language that would predictably fuel distrust with the governments of the states where such minorities reside.

To sum up, the simple passage of time together with an unusually concentrated set of transformative events means that nearly every country in South East Europe will be ripe for new basic security documents in the course of 2007. Regional leaders should place new strategies high on their agendas. Their degree of success in advancing security sector reform, and thus also their countries' Euro-Atlantic integration, can be significantly enhanced by thoughtfully crafted, current strategy documents subject to serious implementation.

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4   One inhibiting instance candidate countries may recall dates from the mid-1990s. Then-EU Commissioner Hans van den Broek replied to sharp criticisms of the Common Agricultural Policy by Czech Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus by reminding him "it is not the EU which wishes to join the Czech Republic".

Given the fortuitously synchronized call for updated strategies across the region as a whole, a final recommendation would be to make an appropriately timed conference or other framework for an exchange of views and perceptions on security and security sectors an early part of the document development process. The South East Europe Common Assessment Paper (SEECAP) held under NATO auspices in spring 2001 offers a useful precedent. Even short of producing a similar common statement,[5] such an approach could provide a catalyst and focal point for parallel national efforts, while highlighting key positive and negative lessons from countries' separate recent experience.

It would also reinforce external perception of aspirant countries' readiness for integration into NATO and the EU, while reassuring that new members such as Bulgaria and Romania were using their fresh status to reach out to their neighbors rather than turn their backs.

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[5]   See http://www.nato.int/docu/comm/2001/0105-bdp/d010530b.htm.