

## Reforming Security Sector Governance in South Asia

*Summary of the regional conference organised by the New Delhi based [Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies](#) (ICPS) on 11-13 April 2008.*

The regional conference was one of the activities envisaged within the project on security sector governance currently undertaken by the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies with support from the International Development Research Centre.

Since the idea of security sector reform (SSR) is yet to percolate among the states in South Asia, the project is a first step towards exploring the issue of reforming security sector governance in the region. The aim is to initiate a process/forum for continued discussion of the issues relating to SSR in the region.

The conference had participants from six the six South Asian countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Papers were presented detailing the status of SSR and challenges thereof with respect to each country. Several reforms are underway in various sectors. However, because there is no common understanding of SSR, the benefits obtainable through a systematic and comprehensive approach to SSR are lost. This fact was highlighted in most of the papers presented at the regional conference. Mismatch in the capacities of the various security institutions can create challenges to the security of the state. As one institution becomes more powerful than another, the chances of it taking over the administration of the state are more likely, especially if that institution happens to be the military. This aspect was also highlighted in the discussions and analyses following the paper presentations.

One of the key issues that emerged in the papers presented and in the subsequent discussions was the challenge to SSR during ongoing conflict. The question was: how can reform take place when conflict is raging? A related question was: when to initiate reform in a state undergoing conflict? These questions were particularly pertinent in the case of Afghanistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

In the pursuit of identifying alternative discourses of security that could help address the issues concerning regional security and the security sectors, a paper was commissioned on cooperative security. However, during the regional workshop, it emerged that South Asia is not yet ready for a cooperative security framework.

The key research question relating to SSR in South Asia is: How can SSR help contribute to peace in the region? In this phase of the project, and particularly through the conference, the main challenges to SSR have been flagged. In a subsequent phase, these identified challenges need to be studied and ways found to address these challenges. That will pave the way for answering the question how SSR can help build peace in the region.

For a region endemic with violent struggles, conflict resolution and management are the planks on which security sector reforms can be launched. There is a need therefore to balance the pressures of good governance and comprehensive security with more immediate challenges of nation building. Additionally, there is a need to encourage alternative security dialogues and paradigms within the security communities in the region, so that a comprehensive understanding of security and the various institutions responsible for it are obtained.

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