

REEXAMINING CUSTOMARY INTERNATIONAL LAW

Reexamining Customary International Law takes on the complex issues and controversies surrounding the history, theory, and practice of customary international law as it reexamines customary law's increasingly important role in world affairs. It incorporates the expertise of distinguished authors to probe many difficult issues that remain unresolved concerning the doctrine of customary law. At the same time, this book engages in a profound exploration of the practical role of customary international law in a variety of important fields, including humanitarian law, human rights law, and air and space law.

Brian D. Lepard is the Harold W. Conroy Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of Nebraska College of Law. He has written numerous books and articles on international law, comparative law, human rights, and tax law, including *Customary International Law: A New Theory with Practical Applications*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2010. He is Chair of the Committee on Formation of Rules of Customary International Law of the American Branch of the International Law Association. He is also Academic Director of the Law College's LL.M. in Global Legal Practice Program for non-US lawyers and international students.

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Edited by
BRIAN D. LEPARD
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Notes on the Contributors

Noora Arajärvi is Fellow with the Berlin Research Group “The International Rule of Law – Rise or Decline?” She has served as an Associate Rule of Law Officer at the Executive Office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Before joining the UN, she worked as a lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), Cyprus; The University of the West Indies in Trinidad and Tobago; and Tilburg University in the Netherlands. She has also served at the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. In 2011, she received her Ph.D. from the European University Institute, where she also coordinated the Working Group on International Criminal Law. She earned an LL.M. degree at the University of Helsinki and an LL.B. degree at the University of Sheffield. Dr. Arajärvi has published numerous articles on international law and is the author of *The Changing Nature of Customary International Law: Methods of Interpreting the Concept of Custom in International Criminal Tribunals* (2014).

Els Debuf is currently on secondment from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as Senior Advisor on Humanitarian Affairs to the International Peace Institute and the Independent Commission on Multilateralism in New York. Before assuming these positions, from May 2007 until September 2015 she was a legal adviser in the Legal Division of the ICRC, where, among other responsibilities, she served as head of the ICRC’s project on customary international humanitarian law and the editor of the ICRC’s online “CIHL Database” from 2011 to October 2014. She regularly makes presentations at conferences and has published a book and several articles on international law, international humanitarian law, and international human rights law.

Jean-Marie Henckaerts is a legal adviser in the Legal Division of the ICRC, where he has served since 1996. He was head of the ICRC’s project on customary international humanitarian law from 2000 to 2010, and was one of the

two authors of the ICRC's 2005 study on the subject. Since 2011 he has headed the ICRC's project to update the Commentaries on the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977. He has published seven books and numerous articles on international law, international humanitarian law, and human rights law.

J. Patrick Kelly is Professor of Law Emeritus at Widener University School of Law. Before his retirement, he was Vice-Dean and Professor of International Law. Professor Kelly received his J.D. degree from Harvard Law School and a B.A. from the University of Delaware. He founded and has directed the Nairobi International Law Institute since 1988 and founded the Sydney International Law Institute. His academic writings are primarily in international legal theory, international trade, and government regulation. His articles have appeared in many international law journals, including those of the Yale, Virginia, Duke, Cornell, Northwestern, and Michigan law schools. He has written a number of widely cited articles and book chapters on customary international law, including "The Twilight of Customary International Law," 40 *Virginia Journal of International Law* 449 (2000).

Thomas Kleinlein is Privatdozent at the Institute for Public Law of Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main and associate member of the Cluster of Excellence "Normative Orders." In 2014 and 2015 he was a visiting researcher at the Yale Law School and the University of Michigan Law School. In the winter semester 2016–17 he is a visiting professor at the Humboldt University of Berlin. He has published extensively on the theory of public international law. His books include *Konstitutionalisierung im Völkerrecht: Konstruktion und Elemente einer idealistischen Völkerrechtslehre* (Constitutionalization in International Law) (2012), and *Völkerrecht im innerstaatlichen Bereich* (Public International Law in Domestic Legal Systems) (2010) (coedited by Christina Binder, Claudia Fuchs, Matthias Goldmann, and Konrad Lachmayer).

Brian D. Lepard is the Harold W. Conroy Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of Nebraska College of Law. He has written numerous books and articles on international law, comparative law, human rights, and tax law, including *Customary International Law: A New Theory with Practical Applications*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2010. He is Chair of the Committee on Formation of Rules of Customary International Law of the American Branch of the International Law Association. He is also Academic Director of the Law College's LL.M. in Global Legal Practice Program for non-U.S. lawyers and international students.

Sofia Michaelides-Mateou is an expert on air law and is currently an Associate Professor of Aviation in the College of Engineering at the Abu Dhabi University. Her research is multidisciplinary, combining law and aviation. Her books on air law include *Flying in the Face of Criminalization: The Safety Implications for Prosecuting Aviation Professionals for Accidents* (2010) and *Air Law: A Practical Perspective*, published by Ant. N. Sakkoulas in Greece. She has presented many papers at international aviation conferences and has published articles on subjects such as unmanned aircraft systems, aviation security, safety, unruly passengers, the liability of aviation professionals, the protection of aviation safety data, and just culture. Dr. Michaelides-Mateou is also an aviation legal consultant who has participated in a number of aviation litigation cases and is an active member of the Eurocontrol Just Culture Task Force.

Niels Petersen is Professor of Public Law, International Law, and European Union Law at the University of Münster and Research Associate of the Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods. His main areas of research are international law, comparative constitutional law, and constitutional theory. He holds a Ph.D. in law from the University of Frankfurt and an M.A. in quantitative methods in the social sciences from Columbia University. He was a Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and Public International Law in Heidelberg from 2004 to 2006 and at the Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods in Bonn from 2007 to 2014. Furthermore, he was Emile Noel Fellow at the New York University School of Law during the 2012–2013 academic year. Dr. Petersen has published many articles and book chapters on customary international law.

Anna Williams Shavers is the Cline Williams Professor of Citizenship Law at the University of Nebraska College of Law. Her primary scholarly interest is in the area of immigration and its intersection with gender issues. She serves as a member of the Nebraska Human Trafficking Task Force established by the governor of Nebraska. Recent articles she has published reflecting her interests are “Human Trafficking, the Rule of Law, and Corporate Social Responsibility,” 9 *South Carolina Journal of International Law and Business* 39 (2012) and “Crossing the Border Through Immigration, Importation, Illicit and Other Means and the Implications for Human and Civil Rights,” 27 *Journal of Civil Rights and Economic Development* 501 (2014).

Fernando R. Tesón is the Tobias Simon Eminent Scholar at the Florida State University College of Law. He has written many books and articles,

including on customary international law. His books include *A Philosophy of International Law* (1998); *Humanitarian Intervention: An Inquiry into Law and Morality* (3rd edn. fully revised and updated, 2005); *Rational Choice and Democratic Deliberation* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) (with Guido Pincione); and *Justice at a Distance* (Cambridge University Press, 2015) (with Loren Lomasky). Before entering academia, Professor Tesón was a career diplomat for the Argentina Foreign Ministry in Buenos Aires for four years.

Frans G. von der Dunk holds the Harvey and Susan Perlman Alumni/Othmer Chair of Space Law at the University of Nebraska College of Law and teaches in its LL.M. Program on Space, Cyber, and Telecommunications Law. He is also Director of Black Holes BV, a consultancy in space law and policy based in Leiden, the Netherlands. He has written more than 130 articles and published papers on the subject of space law. He has also served as an adviser to the Dutch government, several foreign governments, the European Commission, the European Space Agency, the United Nations, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, as well as a number of private companies.

Michael Wood is a member of the International Law Commission and serves as its Special Rapporteur on the topic “Identification of customary international law.” He is a Senior Fellow of the Lauterpacht Centre for International Law, University of Cambridge, and a barrister at 20 Essex Street, London, where he practices in the field of public international law, including before international courts and tribunals. He was Legal Adviser to the United Kingdom’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office between 1999 and 2006, having joined as an Assistant Legal Adviser in 1970. He worked for three years at the Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom to the United Nations in New York, and has represented the United Kingdom in cases before the International Court of Justice.

Foreword

Michael Wood

Customary international law remains the bedrock of international law. Its merits and demerits as compared with that other great source of the law, treaties, have often been discussed. It used to be thought in some quarters that customary law would cease to be important as treaties multiplied. But that was never a realistic view. Even when whole areas of international law are codified in widely accepted international conventions, customary international law continues to play a vital role, as can be seen from the recent case law of international and national courts and tribunals. A good example is the law of the sea. As of August 2016, there are 168 parties to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, yet much scope remains for the customary international law of the sea. This is so not only in relation to those states (including important coastal states) and international organizations that remain outside the Convention, but also in order to complete the law in areas not covered by the Convention and to interpret and apply the Convention in areas that are in principle covered by it. Customary law is also relevant where the law is to be applied to events that took place prior to the entry into force of the Convention for the parties concerned. And it may continue to exist, and be applicable, separately from a treaty, even where the two have the same content and even among parties to the treaty.¹

That customary international law may benefit from examination (or reexamination, as the title of this book suggests) is uncontested. The nature of customary law has led international lawyers over the decades to discuss the

¹ See *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States of America)*, Merits, Judgment of 27 June 1986, 1986 ICJ Rep. 14, 93–96, paras. 174–79; *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Croatia v. Serbia)*, ICJ Judgment of 3 February 2015, para. 88.

“complexities – indeed mysteries” of its operation,² a classical subject that is still debated in academic circles, even if not so much in practice.

Particularly interesting aspects, which Professor Lepard highlights in his introduction to the book, include the history of customary international law; the relationship between customary international law and politics, as well as ethics; why customary international law is law; what counts as relevant state practice; and how acceptance as law (*opinio juris*) is to be proved. These all raise a large number of questions, many by now relatively straightforward, some more difficult. They are also, for the most part, currently being addressed by the UN International Law Commission under the topic “Identification of customary international law.”³ The aim of that topic is “to offer practical guidance to those, in whatever capacity, called upon to identify rules of customary international law, in particular those who are not necessarily specialists in the general field of public international law.”⁴

The debates in the International Law Commission (and in the Sixth Committee of the UN General Assembly) on the topic have evidenced a strong attachment to the “two-element” approach to the formation and identification of rules of customary international law. There is a general acceptance among members of the Commission – and among states – that customary international law requires, in the words of Article 38(1)(b) of the Statute of the International Court of Justice (“ICJ”), “a general practice accepted as law,” that is, both a sufficiently widespread and consistent practice and *opinio juris* accompanying it. That is the starting position for the Commission’s effort to clarify what these elements encompass and how they may be evidenced.

The present volume contains a range of essays that seek to describe the workings of customary international law from various perspectives and in various fields. It is striking that, however original and however innovative these essays are, for the most part the authors, too, adopt the two-element

² Hersch Lauterpacht, *The Development of International Law by the International Court* (Cambridge: Stevens and Sons Ltd., 1958, reprinted by Cambridge University Press, 1996), 390.

³ At its sixty-eighth session (2016), the Commission adopted, on first reading, a set of sixteen draft conclusions (with commentaries) on the identification of customary international law. See the International Law Commission’s 2016 report to the UN General Assembly, “Report of the International Law Commission,” Sixty-Eighth Session (2 May–10 June and 4 July–12 August 2016), UN Doc. A/71/10 (2016), chapter V. See also the Special Rapporteur’s first, second, third, and fourth reports (UN Doc. A/CN.4/663 (2013), UN Doc. A/CN.4/672 (2014), UN Doc. A/CN.4/682 (2015), and UN Doc. A/CN.4/695 and Add.1 (2016)).

⁴ Michael Wood, Special Rapporteur, “Second Report on Identification of Customary International Law,” UN Doc. A/CN.4/672 (2014), para. 12.

approach, at least as their basis. This is particularly noteworthy given moves in some legal scholarship (including within this book) toward different approaches to the formation and identification of customary international law, in particular those seeking to rely predominantly on one or the other element.

For those authors who adhere to the two-element approach, as for the Commission, reexamining customary international law provides an opportunity to highlight the virtues (and address the challenges) of the approach widely seen as encapsulated in the Statute of the International Court and clearly endorsed in practice, and in doing so to contribute to the predictability and legitimacy of this important source of law. Restating the standard position may indeed be valuable in itself: as the Jordanian member of the Commission said, “The Commission should . . . clarify the process according to which customary international law was formed, its constituent elements and the kind of evidence required to establish its existence, all of which would serve to promote legal certainty.”⁵

A key question to bear in mind when reading this book is whether the approach toward identifying rules of customary international law varies according to subject matter, or whether the same approach applies across the board, even if the available evidence, and its weight, may vary from field to field (or, perhaps more accurately, from rule to rule). Overall the chapters of this book tend to support a common approach (even if exact details may differ). The debates in Geneva and New York also assumed a common approach across the whole of international law. As Judge Greenwood has remarked, “International law is not a series of fragmented specialist and self-contained bodies of law, each of which functions in isolation from the others; it is a single, unified system of law.”⁶

Another fundamental question for anyone currently confronting the so-called “mysteries” of customary international law is where to look for enlightenment on the appropriate methodology for identifying its rules. Do we find guidance in writings, in the practice and pronouncements of states and other subjects of international law, or in decisions of international and domestic courts? The answer, of course, is “all of the above.” At the same time, it may be thought that the most authoritative instruction is to be found in the pronouncements of the ICJ, which “relies on customary international law constantly and

⁵ Provisional summary record of the 3183rd meeting of the Commission, 19 July 2013, UN Doc. A/CN.4/SR.3183 (2013), 6 (Hmoud).

⁶ *Ahmadou Sadio Diallo (Republic of Guinea v. Democratic Republic of the Congo)*, Compensation Owed by the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the Republic of Guinea, Judgment of 19 June 2012, 2012 ICJ Rep. 324, 394, para. 8 (Declaration of Judge Greenwood).

as a matter of course.”⁷ Such pronouncements have been and remain a central element in the current work of the International Law Commission, whose draft conclusions on the topic “Identification of customary international law” may now hopefully provide clear and accessible guidance as well.

There is agreement that the final outcome of the Commission’s work should be a set of “conclusions” with commentaries, and that – given the inherent flexibility of the customary process – they should not be overly prescriptive. All this may sound far removed from the elaborate theories propounded in some of the writings on the subject. But that is not to say that such writings, and academic debate more widely, are unhelpful. Far from it, as the present fascinating volume illustrates. As a colleague and I have recently written with respect to customary international law, “academic disputes are bound to continue. That is not to be regretted; those engaged in the practice of law may benefit much from theoretical debate – and vice versa.”⁸ It is certainly to be expected that the current work of the International Law Commission will do so.

⁷ Lauterpacht, *The Development of International Law by the International Court*, 392.

⁸ Omri Sender and Michael Wood, “The Emergence of Customary International Law: Between Theory and Practice,” in *Research Handbook on the Theory and Practice of International Lawmaking*, edited by Catherine Brölmann and Yannick Radi 133 (Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2016), 159.

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within the curriculum of the College of Law. For example, I am privileged to co-teach a course on International Perspectives in the U.S. Legal System for all first-year Nebraska Law students, in which I have been able to share some of the concepts in the book with my students and benefit from their own perspectives on customary international law. I am grateful to them, as I have learned as much from them as they have from me. I especially appreciate the research and editorial assistance of Ciara Coleman, Kiersten Haugen, and Ken Smith, all former students of mine.

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