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Procedures for Controlling Unilateral Treaty Terminations

The absence of institutionalized procedures for resolving disputes about continuing treaty regimes has produced a number of practical problems for international lawyers. A treaty is a formalized reciprocally beneficial commitment to collaborative behavior, which is undertaken in a factual context. If the factual context changes radically, the shared benefits of the treaty may shift and continued performance of its original terms may impose a severe deprivation on one party. When these circumstances arise, the deprived party lodges a claim to amend or terminate the treaty. It is at this point that the absence of procedures for dispute-resolution is sharply felt and the entire institution of treaties in international law is perceived as threatened. One consequence of this situation is the marked reluctance to acknowledge the right of unilateral emendation or termination; the entire institution of clausula rebus sic stantibus is by no means universally accepted. But, in a changing world, a rigid doctrine of pacta sunt servanda itself impedes treaty-making and stable international relationships; its rigor deters responsible states from the broadest international agreements. Where treaty networks are threatened, a state wishing to protect itself must necessarily resort to more coercive strategies whose use can jeopardize general public order.

The International Law Commission’s draft Convention on the Law of Treaties, which was reviewed by the Vienna Conference, has encountered the problem of dispute-resolution in exacerbated form. Due to the strong diplomatic pressure from certain quarters, the prescriptions for invalidating, terminating and suspending the operation of treaties have been spelled out in greater detail than usual. As a consequence, the need for establishing procedures for dispute-resolution has become ever more urgent. Articles 62 and 63 of the draft introduce only the most

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1 The International Law Commission’s draft defines a treaty in Article 2 (1) (a) as “an international agreement concluded between States in written form and governed by international law, whether embodied in a single instrument or in two or more related instruments and whatever its particular designation.” For other definitions in usage, see McNair, The Law of Treaties 1–34 (1961); 1. O’Connell, International Law 211, 264 (1965).


4 See Arts. 43 to 68, Doc. A/6309/Rev. 1, at 16–19 and commentary, ibid. at 60–94.

5 Art. 62, setting out procedures to be followed in cases of invalidity, termination, withdrawal from or suspension of the operation of a treaty, requires notification to other parties of the intended measures as well as the reasons adduced for them. If, within three months, there is no objection by the other party or parties, the claimant may proceed to carry out its intended measure. If an objection is lodged within this three-month period, the parties must resort to the modalities set out in Art. 33 of the
minimal procedures: notification and, in case of disagreement, reference to the modalities spelled out in Article 33 of the Charter. An alternative approach, Article 62 bis, establishes a series of compulsory sequential procedures, most of them institutionalized, which alone will authorize invalidation, termination or suspension of operation.

Past state practice suggests that compulsory procedures will either be rejected by the Conference or, if accepted, be subjected to unilateral reservations at the later stage of ratification. As a result, treaty-making states will be required to devise their own procedures for dealing with the increased problem of invalidity, termination and suspension in a rapidly changing international context. Presumably the jurisdictional clause usage will continue. Its perfection will be more urgent.

The chief weakness of a jurisdictional clause is that it cannot assure initial constitution of the tribunal advertised to in the specific treaty. The jurisdictional clause itself is a reference to arbitration, and general arbitral law and procedure provide for the replenishment and/or opera-
tion of a tribunal from which one national member has defected. But the operation of international arbitration law cannot come into effect until an arbitral tribunal has been initially constituted. Because the state which does not wish arbitration can avoid this obligation, the tribunal may never be constituted and the jurisdictional clause will remain a dead letter.

The moment of formulation of a treaty between two parties represents a comparatively high level of consensus; the moment of dispute, thereafter, represents a high point of dissensus. And the disagreement that characterizes this latter point in time very obviously affects the willingness of at least one party to submit itself to an institutionalized decision process, which may in some way revise the substance of a treaty or a disputed section of it. When a dispute arises over a bilateral treaty, one party presumably demands a change in the treaty regime, whereas the other finds that it is to its advantage in terms of long-range value interest or short-range tactical position to stand upon a strict construction of the treaty.

The optimum moment to prescribe dispute-resolving procedures is clearly the moment of treaty formulation, the high point of agreement. Thus, the question of insertion of a jurisdictional clause into the body of the treaty is best introduced during this sequence. But unless the jurisdictional clause is directed at a standing tribunal, such as the International Court of Justice, the clause may not avail in a high-level dispute. The party which wishes continuation of the treaty as it has been can frustrate the formation of an arbitral tribunal simply by insisting that there is no legitimate dispute and then refusing to appoint its national member to the tribunal. As long as the arbitral tribunal has not been constituted in plenary, there is no means by which the party seeking arbitration can turn to some third party and secure initial arbitral constitution. In the Peace Treaties cases, the International Court held, as a matter of general international law, that an authorized external agent could replenish a tribunal only after that tribunal had been initially constituted. The International Law Commission sought to remedy this defect, in its proposed Convention on Arbitral Procedure, by peremptory integration of the International Court in all arbitral regimes. The Court was to be authorized to appoint an arbitrator in lieu of a national member in order to complete the constitution of the tribunal, and, thereafter, to reappoint a panelist if a national member should defect from a functioning tribunal. The I.L.C. draft was not acceptable to the Member States of the United Nations.

12 Ibid.
One way of avoiding at least this problem is to render the constitution of the arbitral tribunal envisaged in the jurisdictional clause as a component of and necessary condition for the entry into force of the treaty in question. The tribunal could be formed, declare itself in session, register the existence and operation of the treaty and then adjourn sine die. Once in existence, the tribunal cannot be disrupted by the defection of one state. Should a dispute arise and one state remove its panel member, general arbitration law authorizes the tribunal itself to replenish its personnel and, after following the proper default procedure, to render award.

One cannot quantify the political effect of such an ex parte award or, for that matter, even of an award rendered after real joinder by both parties. On the other hand, it is clear that even an ex parte award is more of an authority asset in subsequent negotiation than no award at all. This factor in itself may induce joint submission to arbitration rather than resort to coercive reprisals for alleged breach of treaty obligations. At the same time the integration of continuous arbitration in a treaty regime may render the latter more flexible and, through time and changing circumstances, more responsive to the genuine shared objectives of the parties.

W. M. Reisman

United Nations Seminar in International Law for Latin America

In pursuance of the United Nations Program of Assistance in the Teaching, Study, Dissemination and Wider Appreciation of International Law set up by the General Assembly, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) undertook to conduct annually a series of regional seminars and training and refresher courses in international law to be held in rotation in Latin America, Asia and Africa. While refresher courses are designed to offer training to junior government officials and young teachers and research students, the aim of seminars is to provide a forum for senior officials and scholars to discuss international legal problems of particular interest to the region concerned.

The first regional seminar in international law was held in Quito, Ecuador, from January 13 to 24, 1969. A number of international organizations co-operated with UNITAR at various stages in the planning and preparation of the seminar, including UNESCO, the Organization of American States, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Inter-American Development Bank. UNITAR also received the advice of an Advisory Panel of jurists and diplomats from the region.

The basic objective of the seminar, in accordance with the resolutions of the General Assembly, was to foster the rôle of international law as a means

1 See General Assembly Res. 2099 (XX), 2204 (XXI), 2313 (XXII) and 2464 (XXIII). See also 60 A.J.I.L. 342, 526, 664 (1966).
3 The Government of Ecuador offered host facilities at the Central University of Ecuador for the sessions of the seminar.