BLOGS

Sources of International Law: Types, Scope and Examples

Indrasish Majumder · 22 Aug 2024

Edit TABLE OF CONTENTS Introduction Customs as a Source of International Law International Treaties as a Source of International Law Jus Cogens under International Law General Principles of Law Recognised by Civilised Nations Judicial Decisions as an Indirect Source of International Law Contribution of Legal Scholars Equity as a Concept in International Law The Role of International Organizations in Law-Making Conclusion

Introduction

International law serves as a fundamental framework for regulating the behaviour of states and other international entities. It is a complex system of rules, principles, and norms that have evolved to govern international relations. Understanding the sources of international law is crucial for understanding its creation, application, and enforcement. **Article 38 of the Statute of the International Court of Justice** outlines the sources of international law, which include customary international law, treaties, general principles of law recognized by civilized nations, judicial decisions, and the teachings of highly qualified publicists.

The international legal system is unique as it lacks a centralized legislative authority or a compulsory judicial authority. This decentralized nature means that the sources of international law are diverse and multifaceted, contributing to a dynamic and flexible legal order capable of adapting to the changing landscape of international relations. The following sections delve into each source in detail, elucidating their significance, application, and interplay in the broader context of international law.

Customs as a Source of International Law

Customary international law is deeply entrenched in the practice and tradition of states. It comprises unwritten rules that have evolved from consistent, general practices conducted by states out of a sense of legal obligation. These customs form the bedrock of international law,

primarily because they represent the oldest source, predating written treaties and charters. Historically, a significant portion of international law was uncodified, emerging organically from the habitual interactions between sovereign entities.

There are two parts to the process by which customs become law:

(i) The objective part is when many states do the same thing over and over again (usage)

(ii) The subjective part is when people think that doing that is legally required or right (opinio juris).

Customary rules are pivotal in governing international relations, ranging from diplomatic immunity to territorial sovereignty. The principle of freedom of the high seas, originating from the maritime practices of European states, is a classic example of custom becoming law, solidified through consistent and general adherence over time.

International courts often scrutinize the interpretation of when a custom becomes legally binding. The International Court of Justice, in cases such as the **North Sea Continental Shelf cases**, has elaborated on the requirements of custom, emphasizing the elements of duration, uniformity, and consistency. Once established, a customary norm wields a compelling force, recognized as binding upon both participating states and those not actively dissenting from it.

Customary international law continues to evolve as states adopt new practices and abandon old ones. This dynamic nature allows international law to adapt to emerging challenges and changing state behaviour without the need for formal amendment processes that written law requires. For example, the emergence of cyber warfare and digital espionage has led to the gradual development of customary norms in cyberspace, reflecting the adaptability and resilience of customary international law.

International Treaties as a Source of International Law

International treaties are formal agreements between states that are binding under international law. They are the written source of law that provides clarity and precision to the rights and obligations of states. Treaties can be bilateral, between two states, or multilateral, involving multiple states. They cover a wide array of subjects, including peace agreements, trade, human rights, and environmental protection.

The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties of 1969 codified the customary rules of treaty law and is a cornerstone of modern international treaty law. The convention defines a treaty as an "international agreement, concluded between states in written form and governed by international law." This convention not only provides the framework for the creation, interpretation, and enforcement of treaties but also affirms that every state possesses the capacity to conclude treaties.

Treaties are vital because they represent the explicit consent of the states to the obligations therein. They bring order and predictability to international relations, allowing states to cooperate and coexist peacefully. The process of treaty-making is often quicker than the development of customary law, as it does not require the gradual evolution of state practice. Treaties can also serve to codify existing customary law or create new international laws.

One cannot overstate the significance of treaties in contemporary international law. Treaties serve as the primary means of establishing new international norms and codifying old ones for clarity. For example, **the United Nations Charter,** a treaty, serves as the foundational legal document of the United Nations and lays down the principles of international peace and security. **The Convention on Biological Diversity** is another treaty that addresses the conservation of biological diversity, sustainable use of its components, and fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources.

Jus Cogens under International Law

Peremptory norms, or jus cogens, are fundamental principles that form the hierarchy's pinnacle of international law. These norms are considered non-derogable and binding on all states, irrespective of their consent. They are so fundamental that no state may violate or contract out of them, even by mutual agreement. Examples of such norms include the prohibitions against genocide, slavery, torture, and aggression.

Jus cogens norms are integral to maintaining the international legal order's integrity, reflecting the community of states' ethical standards and shared values. They can invalidate international agreements and other norms of international law that conflict with them. For instance, any treaty or agreement that purports to authorise genocide would be automatically void as it contravenes the peremptory norm prohibiting such acts.

The recognition of these norms has evolved, with significant development occurring during the 20th century as the international community responded to egregious violations of human dignity. The recognition of certain rights and prohibitions as jus cogens is a testament to the international community's collective commitment to uphold certain fundamental values that transcend individual state interests.

The United Nations established the International Law Commission, which plays a crucial role in developing and codifying jus cogens norms. The commission's work has been instrumental in clarifying the application of peremptory norms and ensuring their continued relevance and coherence in the face of new challenges. The development of jus cogens signifies the recognition of certain practices as so abhorrent and deleterious to the international community that they require universal prohibition.

The concept of jus cogens emerged from principles found in Roman law, where certain legal rules were considered so fundamental that they could not be set aside. In contemporary international law, these norms are considered a reflection of the values of the international community as a whole. The mandatory nature of these norms ensures no deviation, thereby preserving the most critical values of international law.

The identification of new jus cogens norms can be contentious, often requiring a high degree of consensus among states and sometimes leading to vigorous debate within the international legal community. Nevertheless, the existence of such norms is a clear indication that international law, while based on the consent of states, also recognises inherent principles that safeguard fundamental rights and maintain a baseline for human conduct.

General Principles of Law Recognised by Civilised Nations

General principles of law recognised by civilised nations are those legal principles that are common to major legal systems around the world. **Article 38(1)(c) of the Statute of the International Court of Justice (ICJ)** incorporates these principles as a source of international law. The ICJ and other international tribunals use these principles as a foundation to rule on issues not explicitly covered by treaties or customary international law.

These principles are considered a subsidiary means for the determination of rules of law and include notions such as equity, good faith, estoppel, and the protection of basic human rights. They serve to fill in gaps in international law and provide a sense of justice and fairness that

transcends individual legal systems. By drawing on these commonly recognised principles, international law can ensure a measure of consistency and predictability in its application.

The application of these general principles often comes into play when international courts and tribunals face cases that involve issues not explicitly addressed by treaties or international customs. For instance, states have applied the principle of estoppel to prevent them from contradicting their previous statements or behaviours, which could harm other states that have relied on those statements or behaviours.

In the realm of international environmental law, principles like the precautionary principle and the polluter pays principle, although not originally established through treaties or customs, have gained recognition as general principles due to their widespread acceptance and application by states in their domestic legislation and international dealings. These principles ensure that states conduct themselves in a manner that is not only lawful but also equitable and reasonable.

The importance of these general principles lies in their universal applicability, as they are principles that civilised nations have recognised and applied within their legal systems. The ICJ and other international judicial bodies use them as an essential component of their legal reasoning, serving as a moral compass for the development of international legal norms.

Judicial Decisions as an Indirect Source of International Law

Judicial decisions play a complementary role in the development of international law. Although they are not considered primary sources, the decisions of international courts and tribunals, such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the International Criminal Court (ICC), and various international arbitral tribunals, contribute significantly to the interpretation, application, and, occasionally, the creation of international legal norms.

These decisions serve as a secondary means of establishing legal principles, as they are an indirect and supplementary source of international law. This is because, under **Article 59 of the ICJ Statute**, the decisions of the Court have no binding force except between the parties concerning that particular case. Despite lacking the formal precedent-setting power of some domestic legal systems, judicial decisions wield significant persuasive authority and frequently serve as a guide in subsequent disputes.

The role of judicial decisions in international law is multifaceted. They can clarify the content and scope of existing legal rules, fill gaps in international law, and, over time, contribute to the

evolution of new rules. For example, the ICJ's jurisprudence has significantly shaped the law of state responsibility and the rules governing the use of force. Moreover, the decisions of international criminal tribunals have been pivotal in defining crimes against humanity and the principles of individual criminal responsibility.

Despite their non-binding nature, the consistent application of certain legal principles by international courts can lead to the crystallization of those principles into customary international law. The contribution of judicial decisions to international law is, therefore, both interpretative and creative, as they play an essential part in the ongoing development of international legal norms.

In this light, judicial decisions are more than mere resolutions of individual disputes; they are sources of rich legal reasoning and interpretation that can have a profound impact on the evolution of international law. Courts and tribunals frequently elaborate on the content and implications of international law, often addressing complex and novel issues. This elucidation can inform the practice of states, influencing their subsequent conduct and potentially leading to the development of new customary norms or the interpretation of treaties.

The interpretive function of judicial decisions is particularly evident in the way international courts handle the principle of proportionality, the concept of due diligence, or the doctrine of necessity. Treaties and customary law may not explicitly lay out these concepts, but judicial decisions further define and apply them, thereby adding a nuanced understanding to international law.

Moreover, the jurisprudence of international tribunals can play a role in the recognition of new rights and obligations. For instance, the decisions of international courts have significantly influenced the recognition of the right to a healthy environment as an aspect of existing human rights or the progressive acknowledgement of the rights of indigenous peoples.

Despite their influence, we must approach judicial decisions cautiously. Given the diversity of international legal systems and the multiplicity of judicial bodies, there is a risk of fragmentation and inconsistency. Therefore, the international legal community must maintain coherence and ensure that judicial decisions contribute to the stability and predictability of international law.

Contribution of Legal Scholars

Article 38(1)(d) of the ICJ Statute recognizes the contributions of legal scholars, or jurists, to international law as a secondary means for determining the rules of law. While not a primary source, legal scholarship plays a significant role in the interpretation, development, and critique of international law. The writings of jurists can influence the formation of new legal norms, elucidate complex legal doctrines, and provide valuable insights into the application of international law.

Scholars of international law engage in rigorous analysis of legal principles, state practice, and the decisions of international tribunals. Their work often encompasses comprehensive doctrinal research, comparative studies, and theoretical reflection on the nature and function of international law. Through their publications—ranging from articles and books to commentaries and treatises—jurists can highlight trends, propose reforms, and critique existing legal frameworks.

Legal scholarship's influence extends beyond academic circles to the practice of international law. International courts and tribunals frequently cite the legal opinions of esteemed jurists as persuasive authority on various legal issues. Additionally, scholars may serve as advisors to governments and international organizations, helping to shape policy decisions and negotiate treaties.

In fields of international law where treaties or customary norms are absent or unclear, the work of legal scholars gains even greater prominence. For instance, the scholarly analysis of the principles of criminal responsibility, the definition of international crimes, and the mechanisms for enforcement significantly advanced the development of international criminal law, particularly before the establishment of permanent international criminal tribunals.

The contributions of legal scholarship are also crucial in the context of emerging international legal issues, such as the regulation of the internet, the legal challenges posed by climate change, and the protection of data privacy. Jurists can provide innovative legal approaches and solutions to these contemporary challenges, which states and international bodies may eventually adopt.

Equity as a Concept in International Law

Equity, while not explicitly listed as a source of international law, plays an indispensable role in the application and interpretation of legal norms. Equity represents the notions of fairness, justice, and impartiality, which are often essential to supplementing the rigid application of law. The use of equity is particularly important in international law, where rigid adherence to the letter

of the law can sometimes lead to unjust outcomes due to the complexity and diversity of international relations.

International courts and tribunals have invoked the concept of equity to reach decisions that not only adhere to the law but also embody the principles of fairness. For example, the International Court of Justice has relied on equitable principles in delimiting maritime boundaries, where a strict application of legal rules might not account for the unique geographical and historical circumstances of the states involved. In such instances, the court seeks an equitable result that is reasonable and balanced for the parties concerned.

When the law is silent, unclear, or incomplete, equity also acts as a corrective measure to ensure justice. In situations where legal texts are ambiguous or provide no solution to a particular issue, principles of equity can guide the application of general legal rules to achieve a fair and equitable outcome. This approach aligns with the belief that law, at its core, serves as a tool for achieving justice and should not operate in a vacuum, disconnected from the context of human affairs.

While equity is a valuable tool in international law, its application is not without limitations. Concerns about the subjective nature of equity and the potential for unpredictable outcomes have led to cautious use by international courts. The challenge lies in balancing the need for legal certainty with the flexibility required to achieve equitable results. To this end, courts typically apply equity within the framework of legal rules, ensuring that its use does not undermine the predictability and consistency essential to international legal order.

The Role of International Organizations in Law-Making

International organizations, particularly those under the umbrella of the United Nations, have become increasingly influential in the development of international law. The resolutions and decisions of these organizations, while not legally binding in the same way as treaties or customary law, contribute to the normative framework of international relations and have a significant impact on the evolution of legal principles.

The General Assembly of the United Nations has been instrumental in initiating and formalizing developments in international law through its resolutions and declarations. While these documents do not have the force of law, they often reflect the collective will of the international community and can influence state behaviour. If states consistently follow these resolutions, they may crystallize into customary international law over time.

Furthermore, international organizations play a critical role in the codification and progressive development of international law. For instance, the International Law Commission is responsible for the systematization and unification of international legal norms. Its work has led to the creation of draft articles that have served as the basis for key international treaties, such as the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties.

The impact of international organizations on law-making extends to specialized agencies as well. For example, the International Maritime Organization has developed a comprehensive body of international maritime law, and the World Health Organization has set global health standards that member states often adopt into their domestic law.

International organizations also facilitate cooperation between states in addressing global challenges, such as climate change, terrorism, and transnational crime. Through multilateral treaties and collaborative frameworks established under the auspices of these organizations, states can agree on joint actions and legal standards to tackle issues that no single state can resolve alone.

Conclusion

The sources of international law provide a rich tapestry of rules and principles that guide the behaviour of states and international organizations. From the ancient customs and practices that have crystallized into binding norms to the elaborate treaties that outline specific legal obligations, each source plays a pivotal role in maintaining international order. The general principles of law, with their roots in the major legal systems of the world, offer a universal foundation for justice and fairness, while judicial decisions and scholarly writings contribute to the progressive development and elucidation of international law.

International law is characterized by its diversity and evolutionary nature. It is not static; it grows and responds to the needs of the international community. The world will continue to interpret, develop, and perhaps even reimagine the sources of international law to effectively meet new and complex challenges like cyber warfare, climate change, and global pandemics.

In conclusion, the interplay of customs, treaties, general principles, judicial decisions, and scholarly work ensures that international law remains a living system, reflective of the changing realities of the international community. Understanding these sources is not only fundamental for legal practitioners and scholars but also for states and individuals who seek to navigate the

intricate and ever-evolving landscape of international relations.