

# Inter-American Juridical Committee

## International Law and State Cyber Operations



# OAS

COMISSÃO JURÍDICA INTERAMERICANA  
COMITÉ JURÍDICO INTERAMERICANO  
INTER-AMERICAN JURIDICAL COMMITTEE  
COMITÉ JURIDIQUE INTERAMÉRICAIN



## **Charter of the Organization of American States**

### **Chapter XIV**

#### **The Inter-American Juridical Committee**

##### **Article 99**

The purpose of the Inter-American Juridical Committee is to serve the Organization as an advisory body on juridical matters; to promote the progressive development and the codification of international law; and to study juridical problems related to the integration of the developing countries of the Hemisphere and, insofar as may appear desirable, the possibility of attaining uniformity in their legislation.

##### **Article 100**

The Inter-American Juridical Committee shall undertake the studies and preparatory work assigned to it by the General Assembly, the Meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, or the Councils of the Organization. It may also, on its own initiative, undertake such studies and preparatory work as it considers advisable, and suggest the holding of specialized juridical conferences.

##### **Article 101**

The Inter-American Juridical Committee shall be composed of eleven jurists, nationals of Member States, elected by the General Assembly for a period of four years from panels of three candidates presented by Member States. In the election, a system shall be used that takes into account partial replacement of membership and, insofar as possible, equitable geographic representation. No two Members of the Committee may be nationals of the same State.

Vacancies that occur for reasons other than normal expiration of the terms of office of the Members of the Committee shall be filled by the Permanent Council of the Organization in accordance with the criteria set forth in the preceding paragraph.

##### **Article 102**

The Inter-American Juridical Committee represents all of the Member States of the Organization, and has the broadest possible technical autonomy.

##### **Article 103**

The Inter-American Juridical Committee shall establish cooperative relations with universities, institutes, and other teaching centers, as well as with national and international committees and entities devoted to study, research, teaching, or dissemination of information on juridical matters of international interest.

##### **Article 104**

The Inter-American Juridical Committee shall draft its statutes, which shall be submitted to the General Assembly for approval.

The Committee shall adopt its own rules of procedure.

##### **Article 105**

The seat of the Inter-American Juridical Committee shall be the city of Rio de Janeiro, but in special cases the Committee may meet at any other place that may be designated, after consultation with the Member State concerned.

# **Inter-American Juridical Committee**

## International Law and State Cyber Operations

**Inter-American Juridical Committee**

Authorities as of August 7th, 2020

Ruth Stella Correa Palacio (Chair)  
 Luis García-Corrochano Moyano (Vice Chair)  
 George Rodrigo Bandeira Galindo  
 Milenko Bertrand Galindo Arriagada  
 Miguel Ángel Espeche Gil  
 Duncan B. Hollis  
 José Antonio Moreno Rodríguez  
 Alix Richard  
 Eric P. Rudge  
 Mariana Salazar Albornoz  
 Íñigo Salvador Crespo

**Technical Secretariat of the Inter-American Juridical Committee**

Department of International Law of the Secretariat for Legal Affairs

This Publication has been prepared by the Department of International Law of the Secretariat for Legal Affairs of the Organization of American States (OAS) under the supervision of Luis H. Toro Utillano, Senior Legal Officer. Copyright © 2020. OAS. All rights reserved. First Edition, Washington DC, November 1st, 2020.

**OAS Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Inter-American Juridical Committee.

Improving transparency: International law and state cyber operations / [Prepared by the Department of International Law of the Secretariat for Legal Affairs of the Organization of American States].

v. ; cm. (OAS. Official records ; OEA/Ser.Q)

ISBN 978-0-8270-7125-4

1. Cyberspace operations (International law). 2. Cyberspace--Security measures. 3. Transparency.

4. Humanitarian law. I. Organization of American States. Secretariat for Legal Affairs. Department of International Law. II. Title. III. Series.

OEA/Ser.Q CJI/doc.603/20 Rev.1 Corr.1

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Improving Transparency: International Law and State Cyber Operations</b> Fifth Report	<b>5</b>
<b>Annex A</b> Questionnaire on the Application of International Law within OAS Member States in the Cyber Context	<b>23</b>
<b>Annex B</b> Responses to the Feb. 14, 2019 Inter-American Juridical Committee Questionnaire on the Application of International Law within OAS Member States in the Cyber Context	<b>27</b>
<b>Resolution CJI/RES. 259 (XCVII-O/20)</b>	<b>61</b>

# Improving Transparency: International Law and State Cyber Operations

## Fifth Report

Presented by professor Duncan B. Hollis

**1.** This is my fifth—and final—report on the topic of improving transparency with respect to how Member States understand the application of international law to State cyber operations. This project aims to contribute to a broader trend in international relations seeking more transparency on how nation States understand international law's application to cyberspace. In doing so it aims to accomplish four goals:

- a.** to identify areas of convergence in how States understand what international legal rules apply and how they do so. When combined with existing statements from States outside the region, a uniformity of views may provide further evidence for delineating the relevant customary international law rules;
- b.** to identify divergent views on what international laws apply or how they do so. This may help set a baseline for further dialogue, whether to reconcile conflicting positions, clarify the law's contents, or, perhaps even, pursue changes to it;
- c.** to limit risks of inadvertent escalation or conflict due to States having different understandings of international law's application *and* not knowing or understanding how others view the issue; and

**d.** to afford the OAS and its Member States an appropriate voice in global conversations about international law's application.

At the same time, it is important to reiterate what this project is *not* designed to do. It does not aim to codify or progressively develop international law (nor even to identify best practices or general guidance). Nor does it aim to offer a comprehensive or overarching perspective on international legal issues in the cyber context.

**2.** Rather, this project is intended—and should be read—as a modest, first step. The Juridical Committee (and the OAS more broadly) may use the materials provided here to evaluate what, if any, further activities might be pursued to add more transparency to how international law applies to States in the region, their cyber-operations, and their reactions to cyber threats by others. The Committee might also consider ramping up existing capacity building efforts to improve the knowledge and experience of relevant officials on the questions of international law's application to cyberspace. This may involve gathering (and publicizing) additional national views and/or establishing platforms or other processes for information sharing and dialogue on international law's relationship to cyberspace and the information and communication technologies (ICTs) from which it derives.

**3.** My first report highlighted international law's limited visibility in regulating State cyber operations despite the increasing number of such operations and their economic, humanitarian, and national security implications.<sup>1</sup> It is true that many States have confirmed the applicability of international law to their behavior in cyberspace.<sup>2</sup> And, although the OAS has not, other international organizations—ASEAN, the European Union, and the United Nations—have

<sup>1</sup> See Duncan B. Hollis, *International Law and State Cyber Operations: Improving Transparency*, OEA/Ser.Q, CJI/doc 570/18 (August 9, 2018) (“Hollis, First Report”), at [http://www.oas.org/en/sla/iajc/docs/CJI\\_doc\\_570-18.pdf](http://www.oas.org/en/sla/iajc/docs/CJI_doc_570-18.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> See U.N. Secretary-General, *Report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security*, 19, U.N. Doc. A/68/98 (June 24, 2013) (“[i]nternational law, and in particular the Charter of the United Nations, is applicable” to cyberspace); see also U.N. Secretary-General, *Report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security*, 24, U.N. Doc. A/70/174 (July 22, 2015).

done so as well.<sup>3</sup> To date, however, efforts to delineate *how* States understand international law's application to cyberspace have had limited success.

**4.** Part of the problem in applying international law to cyberspace derives from the lack of tailor-made rules or standards. When it comes to international peace and security, for example, there are no cyber-specific treaties. And those conventions that deal with cybercrime – the Budapest Convention and (if it ever enters into force) the African Union Convention – only target, by definition, non-State actor behavior with support from a minority of nation States.<sup>4</sup> Thus, international law's application to cyberspace depends on analogizing to more general multilateral treaties (e.g., the U.N. Charter) or customary international law.

**5.** However, as my second report highlighted, at the global level there is no universal consensus among States on what existing general international laws apply to cyber operations, let alone how they do so.<sup>5</sup> For various international legal regimes (e.g., self-defense, international humanitarian law, countermeasures, sovereignty (as a standalone rule), and due diligence) one or more States contest their application *in toto* to cyberspace, while others

<sup>3</sup> See UNGA Res. 266, U.N. Doc. A/RES/73/266 (Jan. 2, 2019); ASEAN-United States Leaders' Statement on Cybersecurity Cooperation (Nov. 18, 2018), at <https://asean.org/storage/2018/11/ASEAN-US-Leaders-Statement-on-Cybersecurity-Cooperation-Final.pdf>; EU Statement – United Nations 1st Committee, Thematic Discussion on Other Disarmament Measures and International Security (Oct. 26, 2018) (“EU Statement”), at [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/52894/eu-statement-%E2%80%93-united-nations-1st-committee-thematic-discussion-other-disarmament-measures-and\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/52894/eu-statement-%E2%80%93-united-nations-1st-committee-thematic-discussion-other-disarmament-measures-and_en). Both the G7 and G20 have made similar affirmations. See, e.g., G7 Declaration on Responsible States Behavior in Cyberspace (April 11, 2017) at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000246367.pdf>; G20 Antalya Summit Leader's Communique (Nov. 15-16, 2015) 26, at <http://www.gpfi.org/sites/gpfi/files/documents/G20-Antalya-Leaders-Summit-Communique--.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Council of Europe, Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest, 23 Nov 2001) CETS No 185; AU Convention on Cyber Security & Personal Data Protection, June 27, 2014, AU Doc. EX.CL/846(XXV). The Budapest Convention now has 65 parties, although several other States view it with some hostility. See Convention on Cybercrime, at <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/ChercheSig.asp?NT=185&CL=ENG>.

<sup>5</sup> Duncan B. Hollis, *International Law and State Cyber Operations: Improving Transparency*, OEA/Ser.Q, CJI/doc 578/19 (Jan. 21, 2019) (“Hollis, Second Report”), at [http://www.oas.org/en/sla/iajc/docs/CJI\\_doc\\_578-19.pdf](http://www.oas.org/en/sla/iajc/docs/CJI_doc_578-19.pdf).

differ (sometimes dramatically) on how they interpret the application of those rules to State and state-sponsored cyber operations.

**6.** States appear just as reluctant to invoke the language of international law in making accusations about other State's cyber operations.<sup>6</sup> In one notable exception, in 2018 five states (Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom) accused the GRU—Russia's military intelligence arm—of responsibility for a series of cyber operations, including those targeting the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA). The U.K. Foreign Secretary suggested that Russia had a “desire to operate without regard to international law or established norms” while the Netherlands suggested, more broadly, that these Russian activities “undermine the international rule of law.”<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, these accusations did not delineate whether all of the GRU's alleged operations violated international law or if only some did; nor did they

<sup>6</sup> See Dan Efrony and Yuval Shany, *A Rule Book on the Shelf? Tallinn Manual 2.0 on Cyber-Operations and Subsequent State Practice*, 112 AJIL 583, 586 (2018); Duncan B. Hollis & Martha Finnemore, *Beyond Naming and Shaming: Accusations and International Law in Global Cybersecurity*, 33 EURO. J. INT'L L. (forthcoming 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Press Release, Foreign Commonwealth Office, *UK exposes Russian cyber-attacks* (Oct. 4, 2018), at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-exposes-russian-cyber-attacks>; National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), *Reckless campaign of cyber attacks by Russian military intelligence service exposed* (Oct. 4, 2018), at <https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/news/reckless-campaign-cyber-attacks-russian-military-intelligence-service-exposed>; Netherlands Ministry of Defense, *Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service disrupts Russian cyber operation targeting OPCW* (Oct. 4, 2018), at <https://english.defensie.nl/latest/news/2018/10/04/netherlands-defence-intelligence-and-security-service-disrupts-russian-cyber-operation-targeting-opcw>. Canada's accusation incorporated both formulations. Press Release, Global Affairs Canada, *Canada identifies malicious cyber-activity by Russia* (Oct. 4, 2018) at <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2018/10/canada-identifies-malicious-cyber-activity-by-russia.html> (Russian activity demonstrates “a disregard for international law and undermine[s] the rules-based international order.”). In contrast, Australia and New Zealand accused Russia of “malicious cyber activity” without referencing international law at all. See, e.g., Press Release, New Zealand Government Communications Security Bureau, *Malicious cyber activity attributed to Russia* (October 4, 2018), at <https://www.gcsb.govt.nz/news/malicious-cyber-activity-attributed-to-russia/>; Media Release, Prime Minister of Australia, *Attribution of a Pattern of Malicious Cyber Activity to Russia* (Oct. 4, 2018), at <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/attribution-pattern-malicious-cyber-activity-russia>.

elaborate which international laws the accusers believed were violated. Most cases, however, are like the recent Canadian, U.S. and U.K. accusations that the GRU has targeted COVID-19 vaccine research – there is no mention of international law whatsoever.<sup>8</sup>

**7.** In recent years, a number of States have begun to offer *some* elaborations on how they understand international law applies in cyberspace. Beginning in 2012, the United States began to offer its views in a series of official speeches and statements.<sup>9</sup> In 2018, the United Kingdom's Attorney General made an important statement of U.K. views.<sup>10</sup> In the ensuing years, other (mostly European) States have begun to offer their own detailed perspectives, including

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., NCSC (United Kingdom), *Press Release: UK and allies expose Russian attacks on coronavirus vaccine development* (16 July 2020), at <https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/news/uk-and-allies-expose-russian-attacks-on-coronavirus-vaccine-development>; Communication Security Establishment (Canada), *Statement on Threat Activity Targeting COVID-19 Vaccine Development* (16 July 2020), at <https://cse-cst.gc.ca/en/media/2020-07-16>; National Security Agency Central Security Service (United States), *NSA Teams with NCSC, CSE, DHS CISA to Expose Russian Intelligence Services Targeting COVID-19 Researchers* (16 July 2020), at <https://www.nsa.gov/news-features/press-room/Article/2275378/nsa-teams-with-ncsc-cse-dhs-cisa-to-expose-russian-intelligence-services-target/>.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Brian Egan, *Remarks on International Law and Stability in Cyberspace* (Nov. 10, 2016), in DIGEST OF U.S. PRACTICE IN INT'L LAW 815 (2016); *U.S. Submission to Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security* (Oct. 2016), in DIGEST OF U.S. PRACTICE IN INT'L LAW 823 (2016) (“2016 US GGE Submission”); *U.S. Submission to Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security* (Oct. 2014), in DIGEST OF U.S. PRACTICE IN INT'L LAW 732 (2014) (“2014 US GGE Submission”); Harold Koh, *International Law in Cyberspace* (Sept. 18, 2012), in DIGEST OF U.S. PRACTICE IN INT'L LAW 593 (2012). In 2020, the General Counsel of the U.S. Department of Defense offered views on several key questions of international law's application to cyberspace. It is not yet clear, however, whether his views reflect those of the whole United States or only the U.S. Department of Defense. See Paul C. Ney, *DOD General Counsel Remarks at U.S. Cyber Command Legal Conference* (March 2, 2020), at <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/2099378/dod-general-counsel-remarks-at-us-cyber-command-legal-conference/>;

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Wright, QC, MP, *Cyber and International Law in the 21st Century* (May 23, 2018), at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/cyber-and-international-law-in-the-21st-century> (“U.K. Views”).

Australia,<sup>11</sup> Estonia,<sup>12</sup> France,<sup>13</sup> Germany,<sup>14</sup> and the Netherlands.<sup>15</sup> Although a welcome development, the number and specificity of these statements has not (yet) been sufficient to rely on them as evidence of general state practice or *opinio juris*.<sup>16</sup>

**8.** Several non-State actors have sought to fill in this information deficit by offering their own views on how customary international law regulates State cyber operations. The two most prominent sets of voices are undoubtedly those of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Independen-

<sup>11</sup> Australian Mission to the United Nations, *Australian Paper—Open Ended Working Group on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security* (Sept. 2019), at <https://s3.amazonaws.com/unoda-web/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/fin-australian-oewg-national-paper-Sept-2019.pdf> (“Australian Views”); Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Annex A: Australia’s position on how international law applies to State conduct in cyberspace*, in AUSTRALIA’S INT’L CYBER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY (2017) at [https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/DFAT%20AICES\\_AccPDF.pdf](https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/DFAT%20AICES_AccPDF.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Kersti Kaljulaid, President of Estonia, *President of the Republic at the opening of CyCon 2019* (May 29, 2019), at <https://www.president.ee/en/official-duties/speeches/15241-president-of-the-republic-at-the-opening-of-cycon-2019/index.html> (“Estonian Views”).

<sup>13</sup> Ministère des Armées, *Droit international appliqué aux opérations dans le cyberspace* (Sept. 9, 2019), [https://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/communiqués/communiqués-du-ministère-des-armées/communiqué\\_la-france-s-engage-a-promouvoir-un-cyberspace-stable-fonde-sur-la-confiance-et-le-respect-du-droit-international](https://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/communiqués/communiqués-du-ministère-des-armées/communiqué_la-france-s-engage-a-promouvoir-un-cyberspace-stable-fonde-sur-la-confiance-et-le-respect-du-droit-international) (“French Ministry of Defense Views”). I have not labeled these as “French views” as at least one scholar has pointed out that the document is authored by the French Ministry of Defense and its contents may not be attributable to the French State as a whole. See Gary Corn, *Punching on the Edges of the Gray Zone: Iranian Cyber Threats and State Cyber Responses*, JUST SECURITY (Feb. 11, 2020) (“it should be noted that despite numerous assertions to the contrary, the French document does not claim to be the official position of the French government. It was written and published by the French Ministère des Armées (Mda), in the same vain as the DoD Law of War Manual which does not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Government as a whole.”).

<sup>14</sup> Speech by Amb. Norbert Riedel, Commissioner for Int’l Cyber Policy, Federal Foreign Office of Germany (May 18, 2015), at <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/150518-ca-b-chatham-house/271832>.

<sup>15</sup> *Letter to the parliament on the international legal order in cyberspace*, July 5, 2019, Appendix 1, at <https://www.government.nl/ministries/ministry-of-foreign-affairs/documents/parliamentary-documents/2019/09/26/letter-to-the-parliament-on-the-international-legal-order-in-cyberspace> (“The Netherlands Views”).

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Egan, *supra* note 9, at 817.

dent Group of Experts who authored the *Tallinn Manuals*.<sup>17</sup> It is clear, however, that not all States regard their contents as reflecting international law.<sup>18</sup>

**9.** Last year, the U.N. General Assembly tasked a new U.N. Group of Governmental Experts (“GGE”) to invite national views on international law.<sup>19</sup> In addition, to the new GGE, there is also a U.N.-sponsored Open Ended Working Group on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security (“OEWG”) that has afforded participants an opportunity to make statements, some of which reference international law.<sup>20</sup> The GGE, however, only has four OAS Member States participating (Brazil, Mexico, the United States and Uruguay). In contrast, the OEWG is open to all OAS Member States. But most contributions there relating to international law have remained highly generalized. And, like the GGE, the OEWG focuses exclusively on international security issues, cabinining State views on international law’s application accordingly.

**10.** Thus, there is a need for additional fora where Member States can be encouraged—and afforded opportunities—to express their own views on the application of international law. This project marks a first (and some-

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., ICRC, *Position Paper on International Humanitarian Law and Cyber Operations during Armed Conflicts* (Nov. 2019); MICHAEL N. SCHMITT (ED.), *TALLINN MANUAL 2.0 ON THE INTERNATIONAL LAW APPLICABLE TO CYBER OPERATIONS* (2017) (“*Tallinn 2.0*”); see also ICRC, *Report on International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflict* (Nov. 2019); ICRC, *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*, (Oct. 2015) 39-44.

<sup>18</sup> Egan, *supra* note 9, at 817 (“Interpretations or applications of international law proposed by non-governmental groups may not reflect the practice or legal views of many or most States. States’ relative silence could lead to unpredictability in the cyber realm, where States may be left guessing about each other’s views on the applicable legal framework. In the context of a specific cyber incident, this uncertainty could give rise to misperceptions and miscalculations by States, potentially leading to escalation and, in the worst case, conflict.”).

<sup>19</sup> See UNGA Res. 266, *supra* note 3, 3 (on the GGE’s mandate).

<sup>20</sup> See U.N. Doc. A/RES/73/27, 5 (Dec. 5, 2018). A number of (still mostly European) States have used their comments on draft OEWG reports to elaborate views on how international law applies to cyberspace. See, e.g., Austria, *Comments on Pre-Draft Report of the OEWG - ICT* (March 31, 2020); Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, *Comments submitted by the Czech Republic in reaction to the initial “pre-draft” report of the Open-Ended Working Group on developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security*. These, and all other submissions to the OEWG, can be viewed at <https://www.un.org/disarmament/open-ended-working-group/>.

what cautious) attempt to meet that need in the region. It is not designed to substitute for—or compete with—the ongoing U.N. processes. Rather, it aims to supplement those efforts by allowing all the voices in this region to participate and explore the full panoply of international law’s application to State behavior in cyberspace. In this sense, the Committee’s work aligns with the European Union’s call that *all* U.N. Member States “should submit national contributions on the subject of how international law applies to the use of [information and communication technologies] by States.”<sup>21</sup>

**11.** The current project has sought to meet the need for greater regional transparency through two different methods: (i) a questionnaire prepared in concert with the OAS Department of International Law (with input from the ICRC) and first circulated to Member States in February 2019; and (ii) an informal discussion with legal representatives of Member States under “Chatham House” rules (i.e., statements made during the meeting can be repeated but the identities of speakers and other participants remain confidential). A copy of the questionnaire is included at Annex A to this report.

**12.** My third report provided an update on the questionnaire’s contents and asked for an extension to the response deadline, an extension with which the Committee concurred.<sup>22</sup> My fourth report surveyed the responses received from nine States: Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Guyana, Peru, and the United States.<sup>23</sup> Of these, seven were substantive, while the

<sup>21</sup> EU Statement, *supra* note 3.

<sup>22</sup> See Duncan B. Hollis, *International Law and State Cyber Operations: Improving Transparency: Third Report*, OEA/Ser.Q, CJI/doc 594/19 (July 24, 2019) (“Hollis, Third Report”), at [http://www.oas.org/en/sla/iajc/docs/CJI\\_doc\\_594-19.pdf](http://www.oas.org/en/sla/iajc/docs/CJI_doc_594-19.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> See *Note from the Plurilateral State of Bolivia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, OAS Permanent Mission to the OAS Inter-American Juridical Committee*, MPB-OEA-NV104-19 (July 17, 2019) (containing responses to IAJC Questionnaire from Bolivia’s Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the State Inspector General of the Armed Forces) (“Bolivia Response”); *Response submitted by Chile to the OAS Inter-American Juridical Committee Questionnaire* (Jan. 14, 2020) (“Chile Response”); *Communication from Carole Arce Echeverria, Costa Rica, International Organizations, Department of Foreign Policy, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship to OAS* (April 3, 2019) (including letter no. 163-OCRI2019 from Yonathan Alfaro Aguero, Office of International Cooperation and Relations to Carole Arce Echeverria, which includes a reply from the “relevant authority”—the Costa Rica Criminal Court of Appeals) (“Costa Rica Response”); *Verbal Note 4-2 186/2019 from the Permanent Mission of Ecuador to the OAS* (June 28, 2019) (“Ecuador

United States directed the Committee to its prior public statements.<sup>24</sup> Brazil highlighted its pending work in the GGE (which its Ambassador chairs) as the forum where it would address issues of international law’s application.<sup>25</sup> All seven substantive responses are enclosed with this report at Annex B.

**13.** In addition to surveying the questionnaire responses, my fourth report cataloged additional informal conversations about it in concert with consultations held by the OAS Secretariat of the Inter-American Committee against Terrorism (CICTE) with the U.N. Office for Disarmament Affairs on August 15-16, 2019, and the informal inter-sessional meeting of the OEWG. I also highlighted three larger conclusions about the state of transparency in the region with respect to international law in cyberspace:

- First, that all of the responding Member States have an abiding interest in the rule of law, including the role international law can play in regulating State behavior in cyberspace.
- Second, the responses reveal the unevenness of State’s *legal* capacities in this area. Some States evinced deep knowledge of cyber operations and the novel international legal issues they raise while others demonstrated much less familiarity with the underlying international legal rules and the particular questions their applications generate in the cyber context. This suggests a need for more international legal capacity building beyond the excellent work done to date by CICTE and several Member States.<sup>26</sup>
- Third, the low response rate to the Committee’s questionnaire suggests that States remain reluctant to be transparent in their views on

Response”); Note Of. 4VM.200-2019/GJL/lr/bm, from Mr. Gabriel Juárez Lucas, Fourth Vice Minister of the Interior Ministry of the Republic of Guatemala to Luis Toro Utillano, Technical Secretariat, Inter-American Juridical Committee (June 14, 2019) (“Guatemala Response”); *Note No. 105/2019 from the Permanent Mission of Guyana to the OAS* (July 30, 2019) (“Guyana Response”); *Response Submitted by Peru to the Questionnaire on the Application of International Law in OAS Member States in the Cyber Context* (June 2019) (“Peru Response”).

<sup>24</sup> See note 9.

<sup>25</sup> Response by Brazil to CJI OEA Note 2.2/14/19 (July 1, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> For more on CICTE’s activities, see <http://www.oas.org/en/sms/cicte/prog-cybersecurity.asp>. Beyond CICTE, several Member States have also supported legal capacity building. Canada and Mexico, for example, co-hosted a workshop with the OAS on May 30, 2019 that targeted OAS countries for a discussion of international law’s application to cyberspace.



international law's application even when afforded new opportunities to do so. This suggests a need to encourage greater State responses or to seek their inputs in less formal ways.

**14.** With the Committee's approval, the deadline for responding to the Questionnaire was extended to June 1, 2020. Unfortunately, no additional responses were received. That said, a number of Member States did make relevant statements in their written comments to the OEWG's draft reports on international security.<sup>27</sup>

**15.** With the assistance of the OAS Department of International Law, we initiated a second vehicle for bringing a greater range of State views on international law and cyberspace into the public sphere – a Chatham House style conversation on the topic. On June 23, 2020, the Department of International Law hosted—and I moderated—a nearly three-hour discussion that included legal representatives from 16 Member States and the ICRC. The in-depth conversation affirmed several of my fourth report's conclusions, especially the need for greater legal capacity building. It also highlighted several explanations for Member State reluctance to go on record with respect to international law's application to cyberspace.

**16.** In this report, I do three things. First, I am updating and revising the survey of State responses to the Committee Questionnaire in light of the June 23 meeting as well as relevant Member State statements in the OEWG process. This revised survey is appended at Annex B to this Report.

**17.** Second, based on the June 23 consultations, I want to highlight three sets of challenges – technical, political and legal – to achieving greater transparency from Member States on international law's application to cyberspace. Technically, the so-called "attribution problem" complicates Member States' ability to talk about international law's application publicly. States may know that they have been a victim of a cyber attack but be unable to discern

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., *Second "Pre-draft" of the report of the OEWG on developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security* (May 27, 2020), at <https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/200527-oewg-ict-revised-pre-draft.pdf>. The texts of the various national statements are available at <https://www.un.org/disarmament/open-ended-working-group/>.

whether its author was a State (or a proxy for which a State could be held legally responsible). Without the capacity technically (or otherwise) to attribute a cyber operation to a foreign State, States cannot invoke international law since that law only applies if the perpetrator was a State or an actor for whom a State might be held legally responsible. Similarly, where actors operate anonymously, it is difficult to identify the requisite State practice (let alone *opinio juris*) since the behavior is not attributable to a State.

**18.** Politically, some of the transparency problems are internal to Member States – several legal representatives reported a continuing need to better organize responsibility for dealing with cyber-related issues (their domestic legal and policy frameworks have yet to catch up to the current reality). Although a number of States have been dealing with cybersecurity issues for some time, for other Member States these issues are still relatively new and novel. As such, several Member States reported a lack of governmental expertise (or resources) on cyber-related issues.

**19.** In other cases, there are institutional issues; the expertise exists, but is distributed in ways that make it difficult to coalesce into a formal State view that can be expressed publicly. Several foreign ministry representatives emphasized in particular the need for further internal dialogue to ensure that foreign ministries take the leading role in cyber diplomacy discussions, including those relevant to international law's application. At the same time, the desire by certain States to retain freedom to engage in cyber operations has led to a reluctance to take positions on what operations international law might prohibit or restrict lest that limit their future freedom to maneuver or react.

**20.** Other participants in the June 23 consultations identified external political challenges to greater transparency. It is clear that certain States (e.g., the United States, Russia, China) currently have extensive capacities to conduct and defend against cyber operations, capacities that have led them to stake out discrete—and often conflicting—views on international law's regulatory role. Some Member States indicated a reluctance to make similar signals lest they embroil that State in the competition and conflict among these actors; issues States can avoid by staying silent. For other participants, transparency should only occur gradually, over time, once Member States have had more opportunity for careful diplomatic dialogue and discussion.

**21.** At the same time, many of the June 23 participants acknowledged that some of the reasons for State silence were legal as much as they were political – several Member States continue to lack sufficient expertise on how international law may manifest itself in the cyber context to formulate a view on some of the more current, pressing questions (and if a State is unable to formulate an informed view, it has nothing to be transparent about).<sup>28</sup> One participant put it succinctly: “we are not quite there yet” in terms of being ready to apply international law to the cyber context.

**22.** Third, given the results of the questionnaire and the June 23 discussion, I would make three concrete proposals for consideration by the Committee specifically and the OAS and its Member States more broadly.

**Proposal 1: The Committee Should Recommend that the OAS General Assembly endorse the applicability of international law to State and State-sponsored cyber operations**

**23.** As noted, the U.N. General Assembly and several regional organizations (ASEAN, the EU) have endorsed the applicability of international law to State behavior in cyberspace. To date, however, the OAS has not done so. Such an endorsement would send a clear signal of the commitment of the organization—and the region—to the rule of law in cyberspace. A possible formulation for such a statement would be:

*The OAS General Assembly affirms that international law, including the United Nations Charter in its entirety, the OAS Charter, international humanitarian law, international human rights law, the duty of non-intervention, the sovereign equality of states, and the law of state responsibility, is applicable to the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) by States and those for whom States are internationally responsible.*

<sup>28</sup> Of course, such States could be transparent about their inability to formulate a view, but it is understandable that few, if any, States would want to make such a concession publicly.

The OAS region benefits from having Member State acceptance of the application of certain international legal regimes (e.g., international humanitarian law) where global consensus has not yet been possible. I have included sovereignty in this list as well, although some Member States may raise concerns about how it applies. In any case, by taking a clear stand on what rules of international law apply, the OAS could contribute to this global conversation, and, in so doing, advance the rule of law.

**24.** Alternatively – or as an interim step – the Committee itself could endorse such a formulation in one of its own resolutions and forward it to the General Assembly for its consideration.

**Proposal 2: Retain this Topic on the Committee Agenda and Expand its Scope beyond topics of international law for international peace and security**

**25.** Although my term on the Committee expires at the end of the calendar year, this agenda item would undoubtedly benefit from further attention by the Committee. This is the case whether or not the Committee (or the General Assembly) acts on my first proposal. Participants in the June 23 discussion were enthusiastic about the possibility of further diplomatic exchanges. With the assistance of the Department of International Law, the Committee could continue to host such diplomatic exchanges periodically. Their low stakes and low barriers to entry would provide opportunities to identify convergence and divergence in State views that may be subsequently marshalled against the threat of under-regulated, and to date, largely unfettered State-sponsored cyber operations.

**26.** With more time and effort, it might be possible to elicit further “official” views from Member States to help serve the overall goal of improving transparency on how international law applies to cyberspace. In doing so, moreover, the Committee might consider expanding the scope of application to cover topics other than international peace and security, which dominate the existing U.N. processes. My questionnaire did not, for example, address the duty of non-intervention, even as a number of State representatives called for further attention to that topic in my June 23 consultations. Similarly, sev-

eral participants called for more attention to the role of international human rights law in cyberspace; a topic that the Committee could address alone or in concert with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

**27.** In addition, the Committee might seek to improve transparency around how international law protects the healthcare sector. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the region in both humanitarian and economic terms. Unfortunately, cyber threats risk even further harm as witnessed by cyber-attacks on hospitals and, most recently, vaccine research efforts. The Committee thus could focus attention on a topic of critical current interest that would assist Member States and their nationals throughout the region.<sup>29</sup>

### Proposal 3: Support or Undertake Additional Legal Capacity Building Efforts

**28.** CICTE and several Member States have already undertaken significant and important efforts to build capacity on cyber-issues among Member States—both the capacity to understand the technical nature of ICTs and the threats they pose, as well as the capacity to understand and evaluate the legal issues these threats raise. Yet, both the questionnaire responses and the June 23 consultations make it clear that much more work remains to be done, especially in the context of legal capacity building. The participants in the June 23 consultations were quite vocal about the need for additional capacity building on international law’s application in the cyber context. Similar views were expressed by several Member States (e.g., Argentina, Canada and the United States) in their recent comments to the OEWG.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the Committee

<sup>29</sup> For one ongoing effort to clarify international law protections of the healthcare sector from cyberthreats, see Dapo Akande, Duncan Hollis, Harold Hongju Koh, and Jim O’Brien, *Oxford Statement on the International Law Protections against Cyber Operations Targeting the Health Care Sector*, JUST SECURITY (May 21, 2020) (cross posted at OPINIO JURIS & EJILTALK!).

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Argentina, *Initial “Pre-draft” of the report of the OEWG on developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security*; Michael Walma, *Canadian Comments on Draft OEWG Report* (April 6, 2020); United States, *United States Comments on the Chair’s Pre-draft of the Report of the U.N. Open Ended Working Group (OEWG)* (April 6, 2020). These (and other) national Statements are available at United Nations, *Open-ended Working Group*, at <https://www.un.org/disarmament/open-ended-working-group/>.

would appear to have solid support should it choose to signal a willingness to lend its expertise or resources to existing capacity building efforts.

**29.** Alternatively, the Committee might consider whether it could support or conduct its own additional (and more diverse) capacity building efforts. Courses on international law’s application to cyber-space could be supplemented with courses that offer some “technical training” to non-technical experts to assist State diplomats and other representatives in accurately understanding and gauging how cyber threats operate. Alternatively, the Committee might use its meetings with Foreign Ministry Legal Advisers to “game” certain scenarios involving cyber-threats to give government lawyers more opportunities to apply relevant legal rules and standards (and, in doing so, help facilitate a State’s development of its own view of how the law applies). Finally, the Committee might wish to regularize conversations like those that occurred in June – by hosting and moderating conversations on the application of international law among Member States (and perhaps at some point, other relevant stakeholders from industry and civil society).

**30.** In short, thru more transparency and capacity building efforts, the Committee could make an important contribution to improving the application (and efficacy) of international law as a regulatory tool in cyberspace. Moreover, it could do this on its own or in concert with other parts of the OAS, certain Member States or other organizations. The ICRC, for example, has expressed enthusiasm for supporting more capacity building efforts around international law in the region.

**31.** It has been a real privilege to work on this topic during my time on the Committee. I continue to believe that cyber threats – including operations by States and their proxies – create risks that have significant economic, humanitarian, and national security consequences. International law provides a time-tested mechanism for regulating new threats. Yet, technical, political, and legal challenges have made the law generally (and the State practice and *opinio juris* that comprise custom specifically) less visible—and thus less effective—to date. With more transparency on how States understand the law to operate, it should have a greater opportunity to play a much-needed regulatory role in restraining unwanted behavior and facilitating greater assistance and cooperation. It is my hope that reporting on the questionnaire

results and other conversations within the region can mark a modest first step in improving the visibility of international law's application to cyberspace. I would encourage the Committee (and the OAS) to continue to engage in similar efforts in the future and look forward to seeing what products and processes result.

## Annex A

### Questionnaire on the Application of International Law within OAS Member States in the Cyber Context

Verbal Note OEA/2.2/14/19

The Department of International Law of the Secretariat for Legal Affairs of the General Secretariat presents its compliments to the Permanent Missions to the Organization of American States and wishes to inform you that it is conducting a study on the application of international law within OAS member States in the cyber context.

To that end, the Committee respectfully requests to respond to the following questions:

- 1.** Has your Government previously issued an official paper, speech, or similar statement summarizing how it understands international law applies to cyber operations? Please provide copies or links to any such statements.
- 2.** Do existing fields of international law (including the prohibition on the use of force, the right of self-defense, international humanitarian law, and human rights) apply to cyberspace? Are there areas where the novelty of cyberspace excludes the application of a particular set of international legal rights or obligations?
- 3.** Can a cyber operation by itself constitute a use of force? Can it constitute an armed attack that triggers a right of self-defense under Article 51 of the

UN Charter? Can a cyber operation qualify as a use of force or armed attack without causing the violent effects that have been used to mark such thresholds in past kinetic conflicts?

**4.** Outside of armed conflicts, when would a State be responsible for the cyber operations of a non-State actor? What levels of control or involvement must a State have with respect to the non-State actor's operations to trigger the international legal responsibility of that State?

**5.** Are the standards of State responsibility the same or different in the context of an armed conflict as that term is defined in Articles 2 and 3 common to the 1949 Geneva Conventions?

**6.** Under international humanitarian law, can a cyber operation qualify as an "attack" for the rules governing the conduct of hostilities if it does not cause death, injury or direct

**7.** physical harm to the targeted computer system or the infrastructure it supports? Could a cyber operation that produces only a loss of functionality, for example, qualify as an attack? If so, in which cases?

**8.** Is a cyber operation that only targets data governed by the international humanitarian law obligation to direct attacks only against military objectives and not against civilian objects?

**9.** Is sovereignty a discrete rule of international law that prohibits States from engaging in specific cyber operations? If so, does that prohibition cover cyber operations that fall below the use of force threshold and which do not otherwise violate the duty of non-intervention?

**10.** Does due diligence qualify as a rule of international law that States must follow in exercising sovereignty over the information and communication technologies in their territory or under the control of their nationals?

**11.** Are there other rules of international law that your government believes are important to highlight in assessing the regulation of cyber operations by States or actors for which a State is internationally responsible?

Additional explanations about the questionnaire may be found within the enclosed CJI report entitled "International Law and state cyber Operations: Improving Transparency", document CJI/doc. 578/19.

Responses should be sent via Email before June 28, 2019 to the Technical Secretariat of the CJI, the Department of International Law, through Luis Toro Utrillano at ltoro@oas.org. We may also be reached by phone at (202) 370-0632 or by fax, at (202) 458-3293.

The Department of International Law of the Secretariat for Legal Affairs of the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States avails itself of this opportunity to convey to the Permanent Missions to the OAS renewed assurances of its highest consideration.

Washington, D. C., March 19, 2019



## Annex B

Responses to the Feb. 14, 2019 Inter-American Juridical Committee Questionnaire on the Application of International Law within OAS Member States in the Cyber Context<sup>1</sup>

### Question 1

Has your Government previously issued an official paper, speech, or similar statement summarizing how it understands international law applies to cyber operations? Please provide copies or links to any such statements.

**1.** This first question solicited existing national statements on international law and cyberspace. The idea was to make sure the Committee was aware of any prior views of Member States. It also allowed States to avoid having to respond to the questions if they had already taken relevant substantive positions. Of the nine responses, however, only the United States indicated that it had previously made statements and speeches on how international law applies to cyberspace, including 2012 and 2016 speeches by the then-Legal Advisers to the U.S. Department of State and the 2014 and 2016 U.S. Submissions to meetings of U.N. Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Seven States – Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Guyana, Peru – formally responded to the questionnaire. See *Note from the Plurilateral State of Bolivia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, OAS Permanent Mission to the OAS Inter-American Juridical Committee*, MPB-OEA-NV104-19 (July 17, 2019) (containing responses to IAJC Questionnaire from Bolivia’s Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the State Inspector General of the Armed Forces) (“Bolivia Response”); *Response submitted by Chile to the OAS Inter-American Juridical Committee Questionnaire* (Jan. 14, 2020) (“Chile Response”); *Communication from Carole Arce Echeverria, Costa Rica, International Organizations, Department of Foreign Policy, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship to OAS*, (April 3, 2019) (including letter no. 163-OCRI2019 from Yonathan Alfaro Aguero, Office of International Cooperation and Relations to Carole Arce Echeverria, which includes a reply from the “relevant authority”—the Costa Rica Criminal Court of Appeals) (“Costa Rica Response”); *Verbal Note 4-2 186/2019 from the Permanent Mission of Ecuador to the OAS* (June 28, 2019) (“Ecuador Response”); *Note Of. 4VM.200-2019/GJL/lr/bm, from Mr. Gabriel Juárez Lucas, Fourth Vice Minister of the Interior Ministry of the Republic of Guatemala to Luis Toro Utrillano, Technical Secretariat, Inter-American Juridical Committee* (June 14, 2019) (“Guatemala Response”); *Note No: 105/2019 from the Permanent Mission of Guyana to the OAS* (July 30, 2019) (“Guyana Response”); *Response Submitted by Peru to the Questionnaire on the Application of International Law in OAS Member States in the Cyber Context* (June 2019) (“Peru Response”).

The United States response directed the Committee to its prior public statements. See Brian Egan, *Remarks on International Law and Stability in Cyberspace* (Nov. 10, 2016), in DIGEST OF U.S. PRACTICE IN INT’L LAW 815 (2016); *U.S. Submission to Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security* (Oct. 2016), in DIGEST OF U.S. PRACTICE IN INT’L LAW 823 (2016) (“2016 US GGE Submission”); *U.S. Submission to Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security* (Oct. 2014), in DIGEST OF U.S. PRACTICE IN INT’L LAW 732 (2014) (“2014 US GGE Submission”); Harold Koh, *International Law in Cyberspace* (Sept. 18, 2012), in DIGEST OF U.S. PRACTICE IN INT’L LAW 593 (2012). More recently, the General Counsel to the U.S. Department of Defense made a speech that also provided formal views on international law’s application (although it is not clear if he was speaking for the United States as a whole or only the U.S. Department of Defense). See, e.g., Paul C. Ney, *DOD General Counsel Remarks at U.S. Cyber Command Legal Conference* (March 2, 2020), at <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/2099378/dod-general-counsel-remarks-at-us-cyber-command-legal-conference/>. Brazil responded to the Committee questionnaire noting that it would use the UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Advancing responsible State behaviour in cyberspace in the context of international security as the forum in which to address these issues. See Response by Brazil to CJI OEA Note 2.2/14/19 (July 1, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> For citations, see *supra* note 1. Note, however, that the U.S. Response indicated that these were only “some of” the documents indicating U.S. views. Thus, there may be others that warrant attention. In particular, it might be useful to know how much the U.S. Department of Defense *Laws of War Manual* reflects the views of the United States as a whole. See Office of General Counsel, U.S. Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Law of War Manual* (June 2015, updated December 2016) (“DOD Manual”).

**2.** Other responding States indicated that they were unaware of any prior positions on their views on international law’s application in the cyber context.<sup>3</sup> Several States took the opportunity, however, to highlight their internal efforts to establish relevant organizations or regulatory regimes for addressing information and communication technology (ICT) issues.<sup>4</sup>

**3.** Several Member States have used the UN-hosted Open-Ended Working Group on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the context of International Security (OEWG) to make public statements that included references to international law’s application. For the most part, however, these statements are at a high level of generality or tailored to address particular aspects of the text of the OEWG’s drafting report. Several of these statements come from States who already responded to the Committee’s questionnaire directly. However, a few others, including Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Uruguay, made comments relevant to this questionnaire.<sup>5</sup> As such, references have been included to such statements below.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Ecuador Response, *supra* note 1, at 1 (“We are not aware of any official paper the Government of Ecuador has issued on cyber operations.”); see also Guyana Response, *supra* note 1, at 1 (same).

<sup>4</sup> Bolivia Response, *supra* note 1, at 1 (citing a new 2015 law); Chile Response, *supra* note 1, at 1 (listing the Ministry of Defense’s March 2018 “cyber-defense policy”); Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 1 (emphasizing its “national cybersecurity strategy” and new cyber-crime law); see also Costa Rica Response, *supra* note 1, at 1.

<sup>5</sup> All national statements can be found at United Nations, *Open-ended Working Group*, at <https://www.un.org/disarmament/open-ended-working-group/>. See, e.g., Argentina, *Initial “Pre-draft” of the report of the OEWG on developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security* (“Argentina Comments”); Brazil, *Comments submitted by Brazil to the Initial “Pre-draft” of the report of the OEWG on developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security* (April 8, 2020) (“Brazil Comments”); Michael Walma, *Canadian Comments on Draft OEWG Report* (April 6, 2020) (“Canada Comments”); Colombia, *Colombia’s comments on the initial “Pre-draft” of the report of the OEWG on developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security* (April 16, 2020) (“Colombia Comments”); Mexico, *Preliminary comments of Mexico to the initial “Pre-draft” of the report of the OEWG on developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security* (2020) (“Mexico Comments”); Nicaragua, *MINIC-MIS-143-04-2020* (April 2020) (“Nicaragua Comments”); Uruguay, *Comments on the pre-draft of the OEWG report* (2020) (“Uruguay Comments”).

For other Member State comments, see Chile, *Comentarios de Chile al pre-informe del Chair* (2020) (“Chile Comments”); Ecuador, *Ecuador preliminary comments to the Chair’s “Initial pre-draft” of the Report of the United Nations Open Ended Working Group on developments in the*



4. The dearth of prior official statements combined with the generality of those made most recently confirms the hypothesis on which this project rests – that States have said relatively little to date about *how* international law applies to State behavior in cyberspace. It also confirms that most domestic efforts relating to cybersecurity to date have centered on national cybersecurity strategies or policies as well as domestic cybercrime and other ICT regulatory efforts.

### Question 2

Do existing fields of international law (including the prohibition on the use of force, the right of self-defense, international humanitarian law, and human rights) apply to cyberspace? Are there areas where the novelty of cyberspace excludes the application of a particular set of international legal rights or obligations?

5. Although a recent U.N. General Assembly Resolution<sup>6</sup> suggests that there is now widespread support for international law's application to cyberspace, earlier efforts at the United Nations revealed that certain States have deep reservations about the applicability of certain international legal regimes. Indeed, these reservations reportedly led the 2016-2017 U.N. GGE to fail to produce any final report.<sup>7</sup> Thus, there is a continuing need to identify whether the existence of certain areas of international law in cyberspace is contested, and, if so, which ones. This second question was designed to solicit each

---

*field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security* (OEWG) (April 2020) ("Ecuador Comments"); Venezuela (Maduro Regime), *Preliminary Considerations of Venezuela to the Initial Pre-Draft Report of the OEWG on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security* (2020) ("Venezuela Comments"); United States, *United States Comments on the Chair's Pre-draft of the Report of the UN Open Ended Working Group (OEWG)* (April 6, 2020) ("United States Comments").

<sup>6</sup> See UNGA Res. 266, U.N. Doc. A/RES/73/266 (Jan. 2, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Arun M. Sukumar, *The UN GGE Failed. Is International Law in Cyberspace Doomed As Well?*, LAWFARE (July 4, 2017), at <https://www.lawfareblog.com/un-gge-failed-international-law-cyberspace-doomed-well>.

State's views on any extant international law that it considered inapplicable (or where the application might at least be problematic) in the cyber context.

6. Overall, the questionnaire responses reflected extensive support for the application of existing fields of international law to cyberspace. As Chile's Response summarized, "current international law provides the applicable legal framework ... including rules relating to *jus ad bellum*, international humanitarian law, human rights, and those governing the international responsibility of States."<sup>8</sup> Other States affirming international law's application included Ecuador, Peru, and the United States.<sup>9</sup> Along with the *jus ad bellum* and the *jus in bello*, Peru's response emphasized the validity in cyberspace of various human rights, including "the right to privacy, freedom of information, freedom of expression, free and equal access to information, elimination of the digital divide, intellectual property rights, free flow of information, the right to confidentiality of communications, etc."<sup>10</sup> The U.S. echoed the application of international human rights law, while touting the overall application of existing international law as the "cornerstone" of U.S. cyberspace policy.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Chile Response, *supra* note 1, at 1 (As a result, Chile notes that the "planning, conduct, and execution of operations in cyberspace must adhere strictly to respect for public international law, with particular consideration to international human rights law and international humanitarian law").

<sup>9</sup> Ecuador Response, *supra* note 1, at 1 ("The fields of international law do apply to cyberspace"); Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 1 ("bearing in mind the fundamental role of the Charter in terms of how it relates to other international instruments ... it would be reasonable to conclude that no area of international relations lies outside the scope of the aforesaid principles. ... Bearing in mind that cyberspace is becoming an everyday setting for international interaction, the actors in such interactions are required to observe their higher obligations under international law, including the prohibition on the use of force, the right of self-defense, and respect for human rights and international humanitarian law."); Koh, *supra* note 1, at 594 ("Yes, international law principles do apply in cyberspace ... Cyberspace is not a 'law-free' zone where anyone can conduct hostile activities without rules or restraint").

<sup>10</sup> Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 1.

<sup>11</sup> 2014 US GGE Submission, *supra* note 1, at 733 (application of international law comprises the "cornerstone" of US view, taking into account its distinctive characteristics); Egan, *supra* note 1, at 815; on the application of human rights, see Koh, *supra* note 1, at 598; Egan, *supra* note 1, at 820; 2016 US GGE Submission, *supra* note 1, at 824.

**7.** Bolivia also offered a positive response. But its answer focused on the international law “to be applied in armed conflicts,” offering views on how to differentiate when international humanitarian law (IHL) would (and would not) apply.<sup>12</sup> As such, it is not clear whether Bolivia’s positive response extends to the application of other sub-fields of international law beyond the *jus ad bellum* and the *jus in bello*.

**8.** Guatemala and Guyana both expressed positive support for international law’s application. Yet, both offered caveats about how universally the extant law might apply. Without offering any examples, Guatemala noted that there could be areas where “the novelty of cyberspace does preclude the application of certain international rights or obligations.”<sup>13</sup> Guyana, meanwhile, noted that “cyber operations do not fit into traditional concepts” and pointed out “a raging debate as to whether existing fields of international law apply to cyberspace.”<sup>14</sup> Acknowledging the prior work of the GGE, Guyana “respectfully submitted that while it is acknowledged that international law should or ought to apply to cyberspace, it is difficult to easily apply existing principles” such as the use of force which “traditionally implies some physical element and armed attacks which traditionally imply some sort of weapon.”<sup>15</sup>

**9.** Thus, even as the overall application of international law to cyber operations appears well entrenched, these last two responses suggest the need for further dialogue and discussion. It would be useful to identify *which* particular areas of international law’s application give certain States pause and *why*. Doing so would help illuminate just how much convergence (or divergence) of views exist on how international legal regimes govern State and State-sponsored cyber operations.

**10.** Comments by Member States to the OEWG reinforce these points. They reflect a broad consensus that international law, including the UN Charter, applies to cyberspace. Canada, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay, and the

<sup>12</sup> Bolivia Response, *supra* note 1, at 2-7. Thus, Bolivia suggested that IHL would not govern cyber-operations involving national security, propaganda, espionage, manipulation of strategic critical infrastructure, cyber operations with political objectives, or those hacking into private systems putting at risk the state’s economic and social operations. *Id.* at 3-7.

<sup>13</sup> Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> Guyana Response, *supra* note 1, at 1-2

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

United States all made this point quite explicitly.<sup>16</sup> Some States (e.g., Nicaragua and Venezuela (represented by the Maduro regime)) questioned the suitability of existing international law in cyberspace even as they accepted its application in that context.<sup>17</sup> Several other comments added a new layer of concern not raised in the Committee Questionnaire responses – i.e., whether differences in legal capacity might impact the law’s actual application or evolution (as States who possess advanced cybersecurity infrastructure may have a corresponding capacity to disproportionately influence the content and boundaries of rules for cyberspace over States lacking such a capacity).<sup>18</sup>

### Question 3

Can a cyber operation by itself constitute a use of force? Can it constitute an armed attack that triggers a right of self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter? Can a cyber operation qualify as a use of force or armed attack without causing the violent effects that have been used to mark such thresholds in past kinetic conflicts?

**11.** Most (but not all) States appear to accept the application of international law on the use of force (e.g., the *jus ad bellum*) to their cyber operations. This question sought to identify which States in the region adhere to this dominant view versus alternative positions. At the same time, additional application questions have arisen among States who accept the *jus ad bellum* in cyberspace, most notably the extent to which thresholds for the “use of force” or

<sup>16</sup> See Canada Comments, *supra* note 5; Colombia Comments, *supra* note 5; Chile comments, *supra* note 5; Mexico Comments, *supra* note 5; United States comments, *supra* note 5; Uruguay Comments *supra* note 5.

<sup>17</sup> Nicaragua Comments, *supra* note 5 (suggesting we are faced with the “poor applicability” of international law in this sphere but “does not deny in principle that IL is applicable to the sphere of ICTs”); Venezuela Comments, *supra* note 5 (reaffirming a need to “adapt the international law to the context of ICTs, considering the legal gaps that exist”). In its comments to the OEWG, Argentina called for bifurcating the OEWG’s suggestions on clarifying the application of the prohibition on the use of force and IHL. See Argentina Comments, *supra* note 5.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Mexico Comments, *supra* note 5; Bolivia Comments *supra* note 5; Ecuador Comments, *supra* note 5.

“armed attacks” require analogous “violent” effects to those deemed to pass these thresholds in the past. The issue is how to handle novelties in the scale or effects of cyber operations (*i.e.*, those operations that are not akin to *either* past kinetic operations—which surpassed the use of force threshold—nor economic or political sanctions—which did not). How should international law regard such cyber operations? Should they be placed, by default, below the use of force threshold or above it? Or, is further investigation and analysis needed to bifurcate cyber operations in this new “grey zone,” treating some of these novel operations as above, and others below, relevant thresholds?<sup>19</sup> Thus, this question sought to acquire State perspectives on whether to define cyber operations as uses of force (or armed attacks) entirely by analogy to previous cases or to devise some new standard for doing so.

**12.** Bolivia, Chile, Guatemala, Peru, and the United States are all clear that both the prohibition on the use of force and the inherent right of self-defense in response to an “armed attack” may be triggered by cyber operations alone.<sup>20</sup> As Guatemala explained:

[A] cyber operation in and of itself can qualify as a use of force, since “use of force” does not exclusively mean physical

<sup>19</sup> See Michael N. Schmitt, *Grey Zones in the International Law of Cyberspace*, 42 YALE J. INT’L L. 1 (2017).

<sup>20</sup> Bolivia Response, *supra* note 1, at 2-7; Chile Response, *supra* note 1, at 1 (Chile will refrain from using force “through cyberspace” in a manner that is against international law and will exercise “its right to self-defense against any armed attack carried out through cyberspace”); Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 2; Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 1-3; Koh, *supra* note 1, at 595 (Stating the U.S. view that (a) “Cyber activities may in certain circumstances constitute uses of force within the meaning of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter and customary international law”; and (b) “[a] State’s national right of self-defense, recognized in Article 51 of the UN Charter, may be triggered by computer network activities that amount to an armed attack or imminent threat thereof.”); 2014 US GGE Submission, *supra* note 1, at 734; Egan, *supra* note 1, at 816 (suggesting 2015 UN GGE also endorsed the right of self-defense). Ecuador also responded to the question affirmatively, but cited the definition of “armed attack” used in Article 92 of *Tallinn 2.0*, which defines that term in the context of an armed conflict (*i.e.*, the *jus in bello*) – a distinct usage of the term from its expression in UN Charter Article 51 and the *jus ad bellum*. See Ecuador Response, *supra* note 1, at 1; MICHAEL N. SCHMITT (ED.), TALLINN MANUAL 2.0 ON THE INTERNATIONAL LAW APPLICABLE TO CYBER OPERATIONS (2017) (“*Tallinn 2.0*”); see also ICRC, *Report on International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflict*. In its OEWG comments, Colombia expressed the idea that self-defense is “essential to maintaining peace and stability in the ICT environment.” Colombia Comments, *supra* note 5.

force; it also covers threats to and violations of the security and protection of third parties . . . there is a right of legitimate defense against a cyber attack or operation against a country’s sovereignty.<sup>21</sup>

The 2014 U.S. Submission to the GGE emphasized its understanding that the “inherent right of self-defense potentially applies against any illegal use of force” suggesting a single threshold for both rules.<sup>22</sup> This stands in contrast to States that view all armed attacks as uses of force but not all uses of force as armed attacks (the latter are said to involve only the “most grave” forms of a use of force).<sup>23</sup> The United States also emphasized that its inherent right of self-defense can be triggered by cyber activities that “amount to an actual or imminent armed attack” and regardless of “whether the attacker is a State or non-State actor.”<sup>24</sup>

**13.** In contrast, Guyana’s response expressed doubts about the applicability of the *jus ad bellum* to cyber operations alone. Relying on *Black’s Law Dictionary* for a definition of force as “power dynamically considered,” Guyana indicated that a cyber operation “by itself may not constitute a use of force.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, it defined an armed attack as involving “weaponry” and to the extent “no physical weaponry is involved” in a cyber operation, it may not be considered an armed attack triggering self-defense.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, Guyana did emphasize that cyber operations could be used in armed conflicts and governed by international humanitarian law (IHL).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 2; accord Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 3 (citing the ICRC and Michael Schmitt for the idea that uses of force are not limited to kinetic force).

<sup>22</sup> Koh, *supra* note 1, at 597.

<sup>23</sup> See *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and Against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. U.S.)* [1986] ICJ Rep. 14, 191 (June 27) (describing armed attacks as “the most grave forms of the use of force.”).

<sup>24</sup> 2014 US GGE Submission, *supra* note 1, at 734-5. The submission also reiterates the “unwilling or unable” test for engaging in self-defense against a State without its consent where “a territorial State is unwilling or unable to stop or prevent the actual or imminent attack launched in or through cyberspace.” *Id.* at 735.

<sup>25</sup> Guyana Response, *supra* note 1, at 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> See *id.* at 3, 5.

**14.** With respect to whether a cyber operation could cross the use-of-force threshold (or that for an armed-attack<sup>28</sup>) without having violent effects, State views were mixed. Most responding States continue to find power in drawing the relevant thresholds by analogizing cyber operations to kinetic or other past operations that did (or did not) qualify as a use of force or armed attack. Some States, however, hinted at the potential to move beyond such analogies. Chile, for example, suggested that cyber operations analogous to “the threshold of necessary severity” to satisfy the requirements established by international law to be an armed attack can give rise to a right of self-defense.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, however, Chile’s response may have left room for defining armed attacks more broadly, suggesting that “cyberattacks directed against its sovereignty, its inhabitants, its physical or information infrastructure” could qualify as such.<sup>30</sup>

**15.** Peru more openly admitted the “possibility of a cyber operation that does not cause violent effects being classed as a use of force or an armed attack.”<sup>31</sup> It did so, however, based on the idea that kinetic weaponry in the past might have also been employed without causing violent effects and yet still constituted a use of force (*i.e.*, firing a missile across another State’s territory even if it does not land in that State).<sup>32</sup> Overall, Peru emphasized the need to differentiate “cyber-attacks” (which “cause damage to a militarily significant target, resulting in its total or partial destruction, capture, or neutralization”) from “cyber disruptions” that “cause inconvenience, even extreme inconvenience, but no direct injury or death, and no destruction of property.”<sup>33</sup> As such, the specifics of Peru’s response emphasized evaluating the legality of cyber operations in the use of force context based on whether they “cause death or injury to persons or property.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> This assumes, contra the U.S. view, that there may be two different thresholds. *See supra* notes 22-24, and accompanying text.

<sup>29</sup> Chile Response, *supra* note 1, at 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>31</sup> Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 3.

**16.** Guatemala’s response adopted a different approach, suggesting a willingness to rethink what qualifies as “violent effects” because a cyber operation’s consequences “can be greater and more lasting, in that they threaten such sectors as health, security, and others.”<sup>35</sup> It suggested that in the cyber context, consequences that produce “death, anxiety, and poverty” should be considered violent.<sup>36</sup>

**17.** Bolivia’s response suggested that the threshold might be difficult to apply in practice since the “effects of cyber-attacks will not always be immediately known” making it hard to check if there’s been a use of force. At the same time, Bolivia indicated that it would evaluate the threshold based on analogies to the kinetic context, *i.e.*, an “armed attack” arises where “the cyber virtual attack uses unconventional means that have the same impact [as] an armed attack.”<sup>37</sup>

**18.** The United States did not respond to the questionnaire itself. Nonetheless, its previous statements shed some light on its views. In his seminal 2012 speech, Harold Koh indicated the U.S. preference for a contextual approach to identifying uses of force (albeit with the aforementioned caveat that the U.S. definition also would identify armed attacks):

In assessing whether an event constituted a use of force in or through cyberspace, we must evaluate factors including the context of the event, the actor perpetrating the action (recognizing challenges of attribution in cyberspace), the target and location, effects and intent, among other possible issues.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*

<sup>37</sup> Bolivia Response, *supra* note 1, at 2-7 (Bolivia emphasized that the right of self-defense also encompasses “pre-emptive self-defense,” which is only available when the threat is imminent and the need for self-defense is immediate (rather than retaliatory)).

<sup>38</sup> Koh, *supra* note 1, at 595 (“Cyber activities that proximately result in death, injury, or significant destruction would likely be viewed as a use of force”). The U.S. has maintained this view subsequently. 2014 US GGE Submission, *supra* note 1, at 734. The 2014 US GGE Submission was also appended to the 2016 US GGE Submission, suggesting continued support for its contents.

At the same time, Koh clearly viewed the test as requiring an analogy, asking “whether the direct physical injury and property damage resulting from the cyber event looks like that which would be considered a use of force if produced by kinetic weapons.”<sup>39</sup> He also cited specific examples of cyber operations that would constitute uses of force: (i) a nuclear plant meltdown caused by cyber activity; (ii) cyber operations that “open a dam above a populated area causing destruction”; and (iii) a cyber operation that disables “air traffic control resulting in airplane crashes.”<sup>40</sup> To the extent all these examples involve some form of “violence,” it would appear that the United States favors a use of force threshold analogous to the one applied in the kinetic context.

#### Question 4

Outside of armed conflicts, when would a State be responsible for the cyber operations of a non-State actor? What levels of control or involvement must a State have with respect to the non-State actor’s operations to trigger the international legal responsibility of that State?

#### Question 5

Are the standards of State responsibility the same or different in the context of an armed conflict as that term is defined in Articles 2 and 3 common to the 1949 Geneva Conventions?

**19.** States are responsible not only for the behavior of their own organs and agencies in cyberspace, but also for any non-state actor that they endorse or control.<sup>41</sup> The fourth and fifth questions ask about how States understand the assignment of international legal responsibility for non-State actor behavior, in particular the extent of State “control” required. As is well known, cyber threats may be authored not just by States directly but also by a range of

<sup>39</sup> Koh, *supra* note 1, at 595.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.*

<sup>41</sup> See ILC, “Draft Articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts” in *Report on the Work of its Fifty-first Session* (May 3–July 23, 1999), UN Doc A/56/10 55 [3] (“ASR”); *accord Tallinn 2.0*, *supra* note 20, Rule 15.

non-State actors, including hacktivist groups and cybercriminal organizations. In some cases, States may seek to employ these non-State actors as proxies for conducting various cyber operations.

**20.** Tying a proxy back to a principal in cyberspace can be technically quite challenging (although perhaps not as difficult as some supposed in the past). At the same time, a factual linkage is not enough, there must be legal attribution as well – *i.e.*, a sufficient connection between a State and a non-State actor for the former to assume legal responsibility for the latter’s behavior. A State may, for example, endorse a non-State actor’s behavior after the fact, thereby assuming legal responsibility for it.<sup>42</sup> Alternatively, States are legally responsible for non-State actor behavior that they control. Precisely how much control is, however, often unclear. In the *Nicaragua* case, the ICJ indicated that international law contains a rule imposing responsibility on a State for acts of those non-State actors over which it has “effective control” (*e.g.*, ordering the behavior or directing an operation).<sup>43</sup> But, a few years later, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) adopted a looser standard of “overall control” for the purposes of IHL. As the ICTY put it, this test requires “more than the mere provision of financial assistance or military equipment or training” but not going so far as to insist on the “issuing of specific orders by the State, or its direction of each individual operation.”<sup>44</sup> The ICC later endorsed the “overall control” standard.<sup>45</sup>

**21.** The ICJ, however, has continued to insist on its “effective control” formulation in the use of force context. At the same time, it signaled that the “overall control” test might be appropriate in the IHL context, raising the possibility of a consensus on “overall control” in the IHL context and “effective control” in other contexts.<sup>46</sup> Given this possibility, the questionnaire asked

<sup>42</sup> ASR, *supra* note 41, Art. 11; HEATHER HARRISON DINNISS, *CYBER WARFARE AND THE LAWS OF WAR* 52 (2012).

<sup>43</sup> *Nicaragua Case*, *supra* note 23, at 115.

<sup>44</sup> *Prosecutor v. Dusko Tadić aka ‘Dule’* (Judgment) ICTY-94-1-A (15 July 1999) 131-145, 162.

<sup>45</sup> *Prosecutor v. Lubanga*, Case No. ICC-01/04-01/06, Trial Chamber, Judgment (Int’l Crim. Court, March 14, 2012) 541.

<sup>46</sup> *Case concerning application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro)* (Judgment) [1997] ICJ Rep. 43, 208–09, 402-407 (indicating that the overall control test “may well be . . . applicable and suitable” for IHL sorts of classifications).

about state responsibility both generally and in the IHL context based on the existence of some armed conflict as that term is used in the Geneva Conventions.

**22.** In terms of their responses, several Member States emphasized the difficulty of attribution in cyberspace.<sup>47</sup> Others focused less on the question of liability for proxy behavior and more on the State's responsibility to take care that its territory was not used by non-State actors to launch attacks.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Peru commented that "if there is inertia on the part of a State in controlling a nonstate actor that unleashed a cyberattack against another State, despite having the capacity to control them, then that could give rise to their conduct being attributable to the State."<sup>49</sup> For its part, Bolivia emphasized that States should not bear responsibility where they lack the technological infrastructure to control non-State actors.<sup>50</sup> And the United States emphasized that the "mere fact that a cyber activity was launched from, or otherwise originates from, another State's territory or from the cyber infrastructure of another State is insufficient, without more, to attribute the activity to that State."<sup>51</sup>

**23.** For those States whose responses focused on the question of proxy actors, the Articles of State Responsibility ("ASR") loomed large. Chile, Guyana, and Peru all based their response on ASR Article 8:

The conduct of a person or group of persons shall be considered an act of a State under international law if the person or group

<sup>47</sup> Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 3 (finding "clear responsibility" for a cyberattack is "by no means an easy task"); Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 4 (noting great "uncertainty in attribution, and levels of attribution, of cyber attacks" making it harder "to control those who use cyberspace to unleash attacks over the Internet").

<sup>48</sup> Ecuador Response, *supra* note 1, at 1 ("States cannot be held liable for an attack by a non-state actor, but there should be some way [for them] to collaborate to find the perpetrators. Furthermore, a state is responsible for regulating/setting standards for services to prevent territory belonging to a state from being launch [sic.] an attack."); Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 3 (answering in terms of due diligence of the host State rather than the amount of control over proxy actors).

<sup>49</sup> Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 4 (citing ASR Article 11).

<sup>50</sup> Bolivia Response *supra* note 1, at 3-7. On the question of proxies, Bolivia's response was indirect, although it did suggest a link between a State and non-State actors associated with its defense policy objectives and/or strategies of a State in a situation of armed conflict. *Id.*

<sup>51</sup> 2014 US GGE Submission, *supra* note 1, at 738.

of persons is in fact acting on the instructions of, or under the direction or control of, that State in carrying out the conduct.<sup>52</sup>

The ASR, however, did not offer an opinion on which type of "control" the State needs to exhibit, suggesting it is "a matter for appreciation in each case."<sup>53</sup> This tracks U.S. views, which endorse State responsibility for "activities undertaken through 'proxy actors' who act on the State's instructions or under its direction or control" while only saying that the degree of control exhibited must be "sufficient."<sup>54</sup> The United States has also acknowledged that a State may later acknowledge or adopt a non-State actor's cyber operation as its own.<sup>55</sup>

**24.** However, one State, Chile, did offer its views on the level of control required to trigger legal responsibility. Citing the *Nicaragua* and *Genocide* cases, Chile opined that the "degree or level of control or involvement of a state in the operations of a non-state actor, required to trigger its international responsibility is that of effective control."<sup>56</sup> Chile, moreover, took the view that the standards of State responsibility are the same in the context of armed conflicts.<sup>57</sup>

**25.** With respect to IHL, Peru took a similar stance, favoring a uniform rule of State responsibility both in and outside of armed conflicts. While recognizing the ASR contemplates being supplanted by *lex specialis*, it indicated that doing so requires an integrated analysis. And in this case, "[a]n examination of the Geneva Conventions does not disclose any difference with respect to the provisions on international responsibility set down in the Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts; therefore, it cannot

<sup>52</sup> ASR, *supra* note 41, Art. 8; Chile Response, *supra* note 1, at 2; Guyana Response, *supra* note 1, at 3; Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 4. Chile and Peru's responses also appear based on ASR Article 5 assigning State responsibility to "[t]he conduct of a person or entity which ... is empowered by the law of [a] State to exercise elements of the governmental authority ... provided the person or entity is acting in that capacity in the particular instance." See Chile Response, *supra* note 1, at 2; Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 4.

<sup>53</sup> ASR, *supra* note 41, at 48 (Commentary to Art. 8).

<sup>54</sup> Koh, *supra* note 1, at 596; 2014 US GGE Submission, *supra* note 1, at 738 (same); Egan *supra* note 1, at 821; 2016 US GGE Submission, *supra* note 1, at 826.

<sup>55</sup> Egan *supra* note 1, at 821; 2016 US GGE Submission, *supra* note 1, at 826.

<sup>56</sup> Chile Response, *supra* note 1, at 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Id.* at 3.

be argued that the draft articles have a different scope of application.<sup>58</sup> As noted, however, the ASR standard of responsibility only references “control” generally, without differentiating whether it must be “effective” or “overall.”

**26.** Other States had more trouble answering the fifth question. Guatemala suggested that “international forums must continue their discussions on the uniquely different aspects that a conflict in cyberspace would entail, particularly regarding such issues as attribution and territorial considerations.”<sup>59</sup> Other States read this question to ask about differing standards of responsibility between international and non-international armed conflicts.<sup>60</sup>

### Question 6

Under international humanitarian law, can a cyber operation qualify as an “attack” for the rules governing the conduct of hostilities if it does not cause death, injury or direct physical harm to the targeted computer system or the infrastructure it supports? Could a cyber operation that produces only a loss of functionality, for example, qualify as an attack? If so, in which cases?

**27.** The sixth question is the first of two addressing how international humanitarian law (IHL or the *jus in bello*) applies to cyber operations. It focuses on an issue that has divided States and scholars to date – how to define an “attack” for IHL purposes. Much of IHL, including its fundamental principles of distinction, proportionality, and precautions, are largely framed in terms of prohibiting certain types of “attacks” (e.g., those targeting civilians or civil-

<sup>58</sup> Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 4-5.

<sup>59</sup> Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 3.

<sup>60</sup> See, e.g., Bolivia Response, *supra* note 1, at 4-7; Guyana Response, *supra* note 1, at 3. Ecuador’s Response simply emphasized that States “are responsible for complying with the rules in armed conflicts, even where there are parties that are not party” to those Conventions. Ecuador Response, *supra* note 1, at 2.

ian objects) while permitting others (e.g., those targeting military objects).<sup>61</sup> As the ICRC recently noted, “[t]he question of how widely or narrowly the notion of ‘attack’ is interpreted with regard to cyber operations is therefore essential for the applicability of these rules and the protection they afford to civilians and civilian infrastructure.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, to the extent an operation *does not* constitute an “attack,” it may be conducted in an armed conflict without regard to most IHL rules.<sup>63</sup>

**28.** Under IHL, an “attack” is defined by customary international law (as codified in Article 49 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (API)) as “acts of violence against the adversary, whether in offence or defense.”<sup>64</sup> As the *Tallinn Manual 2.0* explains, moreover, “the consequences, not its nature, are what generally determine the scope of the term ‘attack’; ‘violence’ must be considered in the sense of violent consequences and is not limited to violent acts.”<sup>65</sup> The ICRC has noted, moreover, “[i]t is widely accepted that cyber operations expected to cause death, injury or physical damage constitute attacks under IHL.”<sup>66</sup> As is well known, however, some cyber operations (e.g., ransomware) are novel in that they offer an opportunity to “render objects dysfunctional without physically damaging them.”<sup>67</sup> This raises the

<sup>61</sup> For example, the principle of distinction is regularly framed as a prohibition on making civilians the object of an attack. See, e.g., Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Armed Conflict (Protocol I) (June 8, 1977), 1125 UNTS 3, Art. 51(2) (“API”); Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Dec. 12, 1977), 1125 UNTS 609, Art. 13(2); Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (July 17, 1998), Art. 8(2)(b); Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land (Oct. 18, 1907), 36 Stat. 2277, Art. 23(b); JEAN MARIE HENCKAERTS & LOUISE DOSWALD-BECK, 1 CUSTOMARY INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW (ICRC, 2005), Rules 1, 7, 9, and 10.

<sup>62</sup> ICRC, *Position Paper on International Humanitarian Law and Cyber Operations during Armed Conflicts* (Nov. 2019) at 7 (“ICRC Position Paper”).

<sup>63</sup> Even outside of attacks, States must still exercise “constant care” in an international armed conflict to avoid “unnecessary effects” on civilians and their objects. API, *supra* note 61, Art. 57(1); *Tallinn 2.0*, *supra* note 20, at 476.

<sup>64</sup> API, *supra* note 61, Art. 49.

<sup>65</sup> *Tallinn 2.0*, *supra* note 20, at 415.

<sup>66</sup> See ICRC Position Paper, *supra* note 62.

<sup>67</sup> ICRC, *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*, (Oct. 2015) 41 (“2015 ICRC Report”).

question whether a cyber operation that does not produce such effects (e.g., disrupting the functionality of a water treatment facility without necessarily causing physical damage) can constitute an attack. Diverging views have emerged to date including among the *Tallinn Manual 2.0's* Independent Group of Experts.<sup>68</sup>

**29.** A majority of the *Tallinn Manual 2.0's* experts took the view that violence required some physical damage, including “replacement of physical components” such as a control system.<sup>69</sup> Others interpreted damage to include cases where no physical components require replacing and functionality can be restored by reinstalling the operating system, while a few other experts believed an attack could occur via the “loss of usability of cyber infrastructure” itself.<sup>70</sup> For its part, the ICRC has argued that during an armed conflict an operation designed to disable a computer or a computer network constitutes an attack under IHL, whether the object is disabled through kinetic or cyber means.<sup>71</sup>

**30.** The sixth question was thus designed to see if Member States likewise view IHL’s attack threshold in terms of violence (or violent effects) or if they would consider that the “attack” label could be applicable to cyber operations based on loss of functionality rather than more traditional concepts of physical damage or destruction.

**31.** The questionnaire responses reveal support for the applicability of IHL generally as well as the idea that cyber operations can constitute an attack in that context.<sup>72</sup> Responses were more mixed, however, with respect to

<sup>68</sup> *Tallinn 2.0*, *supra* note 20, at 417.

<sup>69</sup> *Id.*

<sup>70</sup> 2015 ICRC Report, *supra* note 67, at 41; see also ICRC, *Report on International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflict* (Nov. 2019) at 28 (“2019 ICRC Report”) (“IHL rules protecting civilian objects can, however, provide the full scope of legal protection only if States recognize that cyber operations that impair the functionality of civilian infrastructure are subject to the rules governing attacks under IHL.”)

<sup>71</sup> See ICRC Position Paper, *supra* note 62, at 7-8; 2015 ICRC Report, *supra* note 67, at 43 (arguing that international law must treat as attacks those cyber operations that disable objects since the definition of a military objective includes neutralization (suggesting that neutralizing objects falls within the ambit of IHL)).

<sup>72</sup> See, e.g., Bolivia Response, *supra* note 1, at 3-7; *id.* at 4-7 (noting two views on whether a cyber operation alone can give rise to an armed conflict subject to IHL); Chile Response,

whether a cyber operation could qualify as an “attack” under IHL if it fails to cause death, injury, or direct physical harm. Chile, Peru, and the United States all gave negative responses.<sup>73</sup> Chile cited Article 49 of Additional Protocol 1 to the Geneva Conventions (API) to insist that IHL attacks must involve “effects or consequences arising from the act itself” that are “violent.”<sup>74</sup> In particular, it suggested that to qualify as an attack, its result must require the affected State to “take action to repair or restore the affected infrastructure or computer systems, since in those cases the consequences of the attack are similar to those described above, in particular physical damage to property.”<sup>75</sup> Peru’s response suggests for there to be an “attack” there must be “people” or “public or private property” that is “physically harmed.”<sup>76</sup> The United States, meanwhile, has emphasized that the IHL “attack” threshold requires looking at “*inter alia*, whether a cyber activity results in kinetic and irreversible effects on civilians, civilian objects, or civilian infrastructure, or non-kinetic and reversible effects on the same.”<sup>77</sup> The implication is that if a cyber operation produces non-kinetic or reversible effects, it will not “rise to the level of an armed attack.”<sup>78</sup> This would seem to exclude, for example, ransomware exploits that are not kinetic themselves or where the data they interrupt can be restored.

**32.** In contrast, Guatemala and Ecuador both responded positively to the idea of delimiting attacks based on functionality losses rather than death, injury, or destruction of property. Guatemala indicated that among cyber operations that can be considered an attack are those “that only produce a

*supra* note 1, at 3. Guyana Response, *supra* note 1, at 3; Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 1; Koh, *supra* note 1, at 595 (U.S. view).

<sup>73</sup> Guyana Response, *supra* note 1, at 4.

<sup>74</sup> Chile Response, *supra* note 1, at 3.

<sup>75</sup> *Id.*

<sup>76</sup> Peru’s response is, however, a bit ambiguous, as it appears to rely on *jus ad bellum* materials to identify the standards for an IHL attack, including citing the U.S. contextual approach favored by Harold Koh. Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 6.

<sup>77</sup> 2014 US GGE Submission, *supra* note 1, at 736.

<sup>78</sup> Egan, *supra* note 1, at 818. Egan’s speech did not mention the reversible/irreversible criterion but emphasized instead “the nature and scope of those effects, as well as the nature of the connection, if any, between cyber activity and the particular armed conflict in question.” *Id.*



loss of functionality.”<sup>79</sup> Ecuador opined that “[a] cyber operation can qualify as an attack if it renders inoperable a state’s critical infrastructure or others that endanger the security of the state.”<sup>80</sup>

**33.** Bolivia and Guyana’s responses were more equivocal. On the one hand, Bolivia emphasized that IHL would define attacks to include those cyber operations “intended to be able to cause loss of human life, injury to people, and damage or destruction of property.”<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, it suggested that a cyber operation “could be considered an attack when its objective is to disable a state’s basic services (water, electricity, telecommunications, or the financial system).”<sup>82</sup> Guyana noted that “[w]hen a cyber operation produces a loss of functionality, it may or may not constitute an attack.”<sup>83</sup> Like Chile, it referenced API Article 49, tying the attack concept to a need for violence (whether in terms of means or consequences): “a cyber operation which does not result in death, injury, or physical harm cannot constitute an attack” under IHL.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, it also suggested that “cyber operations that undermine the functioning of computer systems and infrastructure needed for the provision of services and resources to the civilian population constitute an attack” among which it included “nuclear plants, hospitals, banks, and air traffic control systems.”<sup>85</sup> Such responses suggest a need for further dialogue on how proximate the death or destruction must be to the loss of functionality. In other words, does the loss of functionality to an essential service alone constitute an attack or must there be some attendant (or reasonably foreseeable) death or injury to people or property?

<sup>79</sup> Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 3.

<sup>80</sup> Ecuador Response, *supra* note 1, at 3.

<sup>81</sup> Bolivia Response, *supra* note 1, at 4-7.

<sup>82</sup> *Id.*

<sup>83</sup> Guyana Response, *supra* note 1, at 3.

<sup>84</sup> *Id.*

<sup>85</sup> *Id.* (citing API Art. 54(2)).

### Question 7

Is a cyber operation that only targets data governed by the international humanitarian law obligation to direct attacks only against military objectives and not against civilian objects?

**34.** IHL clearly requires “attacking” States to distinguish between civilian and military objects, permitting attacks on military objectives while prohibiting those against civilians and civilian objects.<sup>86</sup> When it comes to cyberspace, however, it is not always clear what constitutes an “object” to which this principle applies. The primary debate has centered on “data.” Does the non-physical nature of “data” mean it will not constitute an object so that militaries need not distinguish it and exclude it as a target in their cyber operations? Or should at least some “data” qualify as an “object” to which the principle of distinction and relevant IHL rules apply?

**35.** A majority of the *Tallinn Manual 2.0*’s Independent Group of Experts adopted the former view: the “armed conflict notion of ‘object’ is not to be interpreted as including data, at least in the current state of the law.”<sup>87</sup> That said, the experts did agree that a cyber operation against data could trigger IHL’s rules where it “foreseeably results in the injury or death of individuals or damage or destruction of physical objects” since the latter individuals and objects would be protected by relevant IHL rules like distinction.<sup>88</sup> The ICRC has, in contrast, suggested a more expansive definition of data via the term “essential civilian data” (*e.g.*, medical data, biometric data, social security data, tax records, bank accounts, companies’ client files, or election lists and records). It has pointed out that “[d]eleting or tampering with essential civilian data can “cause more harm to civilians than the destruction of physical

<sup>86</sup> When a particular object is used for both civilian and military purposes (so-called “dual-use objects”), it becomes a military objective (except for separable parts thereof). For sources codifying this principle of “distinction” see *supra* note 61.

<sup>87</sup> *Tallinn 2.0*, *supra* note 20, at 437.

<sup>88</sup> *Id.* at 416.

objects.<sup>89</sup> Although it recognizes that the question of whether data can constitute a civilian object remains unresolved, the ICRC has suggested that IHL should do so or otherwise face a large “protection gap” inconsistent with IHL’s object and purpose. The seventh question sought Member State views on this important issue.

**36.** None of the States that responded to this question took the position that civilian data is directly subject to the principle of distinction in armed conflict. Indeed, several States emphasized the principle of distinction without offering an opinion on the status of data as an object.<sup>90</sup> Chile’s response suggested, however, that the principle of distinction could apply to cyber operations against data indirectly based on the knock-on effects of such operations. It cited the Commentary to API for the idea that objects must be “visible and tangible” which means that “under current international humanitarian law the aforementioned data would not qualify as objects, in principle, because they are essentially intangible, without prejudice to the physical elements containing the data—hardware, for example.”<sup>91</sup> At the same time, Chile emphasized that “an attack directed exclusively at computer data could well produce adverse consequences affecting the civilian population,” citing as an example the possibility of a cyber operation eliminating a State’s social security database.<sup>92</sup> It concluded that “[t]he principle of distinction must therefore be taken into consideration in the context of cyber operations, whereby a state should refrain from attacking data in case it could affect the

<sup>89</sup> ICRC Position Paper, *supra* note 62, at 8; *accord* 2019 ICRC Report, *supra* note 70, at 21 (“Moreover, data have become an essential component of the digital domain and a cornerstone of life in many societies. However, different views exist on whether civilian data should be considered as civilian objects and therefore be protected under IHL principles and rules governing the conduct of hostilities. In the ICRC’s view, the conclusion that deleting or tampering with essential civilian data would not be prohibited by IHL in today’s ever more data-reliant world seems difficult to reconcile with the object and purpose of this body of law. Put simply, the replacement of paper files and documents with digital files in the form of data should not decrease the protection that IHL affords to them.”); 2015 ICRC Report, *supra* note 67, at 43.

<sup>90</sup> See Bolivia Response, *supra* note 1, at 5-7; Ecuador Response, *supra* note 1, at 2; Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 3.

<sup>91</sup> Chile Response, *supra* note 1, at 4.

<sup>92</sup> *Id.*

civilian population, unless such data are being used for military purposes.”<sup>93</sup> Guyana’s response adopted a similar lens. Noting that “the deletion, suppression, corruption of data may have far reaching consequences,” it focused on the effects of the cyber operation rather than whether the data targeted qualified as an object or not.<sup>94</sup>

**37.** Peru’s response did not address the potential of data to qualify as a civilian object, but focused (affirmatively) on its potential to qualify as a military objective. It characterized certain “data” (*e.g.*, software allowing troop communications in the field, synchronization of a missile arsenal or location of enemy aircraft) as lawful “military objectives” while suggesting other data systems used in conflicts (*e.g.*, “a data system that enabled the operating room of a field hospital treating war wounded or civilians to function”) were not subject to attack.<sup>95</sup>

**38.** Several Member States’ comments to the OEWG affirmed the importance of applying IHL to the cyber context. States like Brazil emphasized, moreover, that this application should expressly include core principles—“humanity, necessity, proportionality, and distinction.”<sup>96</sup> None of the Member State OEWG contributions, however, addressed the definition of an attack nor the idea of data as a civilian (or military) object.

<sup>93</sup> *Id.*

<sup>94</sup> Guyana Response, *supra* note 1, at 4 (“As it relates to data...regard should be had to whether the cyber operation that targets data has produced such a loss of functionality that it may constitute an attack”).

<sup>95</sup> Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 6. Peru explained that attacks in the first case could cause significant military harm to opposing forces while an attack on the data in the field hospital would “not create a legitimate military advantage.” *Id.*

<sup>96</sup> Brazil Comments, *supra* note 5.

### Question 8

Is sovereignty a discrete rule of international law that prohibits States from engaging in specific cyber operations? If so, does that prohibition cover cyber operations that fall below the use of force threshold and which do not otherwise violate the duty of non-intervention?

**39.** Sovereignty is undoubtedly the core architectural feature of the current international legal order, providing States with both rights and responsibilities.<sup>97</sup> Sovereignty serves as a foundational principle for some of the international legal rules already mentioned (e.g., the prohibition on the use of force, the right of self-defense, State responsibility). Moreover, in certain contexts, sovereignty exists not as just a background principle, but as an independent rule directly regulating State behavior (i.e., a foreign aircraft entering another State's airspace without permission violates its sovereignty).<sup>98</sup> It is not yet clear, however, whether sovereignty operates as a rule in cyberspace. *Tallinn Man-*

<sup>97</sup> *Island of Palmas (Netherlands v. United States of America)*, 2 R.I.A.A. 829, 839 (1928) (“Sovereignty in the relations between States signifies independence. Independence in regard to the portion of the globe is the right to exercise therein, to the exclusion of any other State, the functions of a State. . . Territorial sovereignty, as has already been said, involves the exclusive right to display the activities of a State. This right has as corollary a duty: the obligation to protect within the territory the rights of other States, in particular their right to integrity and inviolability in peace and in war.”).

<sup>98</sup> See, e.g., Michael N. Schmitt and Liis Vihul, *Respect for Sovereignty in Cyberspace*, 95 TEXAS L. REV. 1639, 1640 (2017). In addition to Article 2(4)'s prohibition on the use of force, there is widespread agreement on a duty of non-intervention in international law that is applicable to cyberspace. See, e.g., *Case Concerning Armed Activities in the Territory of the Congo (Democratic Republic of the Congo v. Uganda)* (Jurisdiction and Admissibility) [2006] ICJ Rep. 6, 46-48; *Nicaragua Case*, *supra* note 23, at 205; Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations & Co-operation among States, UNGA Res. 2625 (XXV), U.N. Doc. A/RES/25/2625 (Oct. 23, 1970). The 2015 UN GGE endorsed it among the applicable rules of international law in cyberspace. U.N. Secretary-General, *Report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security*, U.N. Doc. A/70/174 (July 22, 2015) 26, 28(b). And Rule 66 of *Tallinn 2.0* posits that “A State may not intervene, including by cyber means, in the internal or external affairs of another State.” *Tallinn 2.0*, *supra* note 20, at 312. As with the use of force, however, questions remain about how this duty operates in cyberspace and what cyber operations it prohibits or otherwise regulates.

*ual 2.0* indicated that it constitutes a rule that operates to constrain a State's cyber operations that do not rise to the level of a use of force or constitute a prohibited intervention.<sup>99</sup> In 2018, however, the U.K. Attorney General took the view that sovereignty was a principle that informed other rules not a rule of international law itself.<sup>100</sup> Since then, the French Ministry of Defense and the Dutch government have both expressed support for sovereignty as a stand-alone rule.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>99</sup> *Tallinn 2.0*, *supra* note 20, Rule 4 (“A State must not conduct cyber operations that violate the sovereignty of another State.”).

<sup>100</sup> See, e.g., Jeremy Wright, QC, MP, *Cyber and International Law in the 21st Century* (May 23, 2018), at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/cyber-and-international-law-in-the-21st-century> (“U.K. Views”) (“Some have sought to argue for the existence of a cyber-specific rule of a ‘violation of territorial sovereignty’ . . . Sovereignty is of course fundamental to the international rules-based system. But I am not persuaded that we can currently extrapolate from that general principle a specific rule or additional prohibition for cyber activity beyond that of a prohibited intervention. The UK Government’s position is therefore that there is no such rule as a matter of current international law.”).

<sup>101</sup> See Ministère des Armées, *Droit international appliqué aux opérations dans le cyberspace* (Sept. 9, 2019), at <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/communiques/communiques-du-ministere-des-armees/communiquel-la-france-s-engage-a-promouvoir-un-cyberspace-stable-fonde-sur-la-confiance-et-le-respect-du-droit-international> (“French Ministry of Defense Views”) at 6 (“Any unauthorised penetration by a State of French systems or any production of effects on French territory via a digital vector may constitute, at the least, a breach of sovereignty” (English translation by Rapporteur)); *Letter to the parliament on the international legal order in cyberspace*, July 5, 2019, Appendix 1, at <https://www.government.nl/ministries/ministry-of-foreign-affairs/documents/parliamentary-documents/2019/09/26/letter-to-the-parliament-on-the-international-legal-order-in-cyberspace> (“The Netherlands Views”) (“According to some countries and legal scholars, the sovereignty principle does not constitute an independently binding rule of international law that is separate from the other rules derived from it. The Netherlands does not share this view. It believes that respect for the sovereignty of other countries is an obligation in its own right, the violation of which may in turn constitute an internationally wrongful act.”). A recent scholarly treatment questions if France clearly falls in the sovereignty-as-rule camp. See Gary Corn, *Punching on the Edges of the Gray Zone: Iranian Cyber Threats and State Cyber Responses*, JUST SECURITY (Feb. 11, 2020) (“although the MdA does state that cyberattacks, as it defines that term, against French digital systems or any effects produced on French territory by digital means may constitute a breach of sovereignty in the general sense, at no point does it assert unequivocally that a violation of the principle of sovereignty constitutes a breach of an international obligation. To the contrary, obviously aware of the debate, the document is deliberately vague on this point and simply asserts France’s right to respond to cyberattacks with the full range of options available under international law.”).

**40.** The eighth question sought to solicit Member State views on the question of sovereignty— as-principle versus sovereignty-as-rule. It was focused on the constraining function of sovereignty, *i.e.*, whether and how it limits a State’s ability to conduct cyber operations outside of its territory. Interestingly, many of the responding States took the question as an invitation to reaffirm sovereignty’s enabling function – *i.e.*, according State’s authority to regulate ICTs within their own territorial jurisdiction. Bolivia and Guyana, for example, both cited sovereignty as authorizing States to exercise jurisdiction over cyber infrastructure or activities in their territory.<sup>102</sup> Ecuador, in contrast, cast doubt on the ability of States to exercise their sovereignty in cyberspace given its “intangible” characteristics, while affirming States do have sovereignty over “Cyber infrastructure” and activity related to that infrastructure in their territory.<sup>103</sup> Chile and the United States also echoed the power sovereignty accords States over ICTs in their territory, but noted that this power must operate within limits. Both cited the need for States to exercise their sovereignty consistent with international human rights law.<sup>104</sup> This last point was echoed by Colombia in its comments to the OEWG.<sup>105</sup>

**41.** On the question of whether sovereignty operates as a stand-alone rule in cyberspace, three States—Bolivia, Guatemala, and Guyana—affirmed its status as such.<sup>106</sup> Guyana, for example, indicated that sovereignty protections are “not limited to activities amounting to an unjustified use of force, to an armed attack, or to a prohibited intervention.”<sup>107</sup> Thus, it took the view that a State “must not conduct cyber operations that violate the sovereignty of another State” with the existence of such violations depending on “the degree

<sup>102</sup> Bolivia Response, *supra* note 1, at 5-7; Guyana Response, *supra* note 1, at 5.

<sup>103</sup> Ecuador Response, *supra* note 1, at 2.

<sup>104</sup> Chile Response, *supra* note 1, at 4-5 (recognizing sovereignty authorizes protection and defense of a State’s “critical information infrastructure” as long as those sovereignty-based measures “do not violate the rule of international law – for example, those contained in international human rights law or international humanitarian law.”); 2014 US GGE Submission, *supra* note 1, at 737-8 (noting that the exercise of jurisdiction of a territorial State “is not unlimited; it must be consistent with applicable international law, including international human rights obligations” and citing, in particular freedom of expression and freedom of opinion).

<sup>105</sup> Colombia Comments, *supra* note 5.

<sup>106</sup> Bolivia Response, *supra* note 1, at 5-7; Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 3; Guyana Response, *supra* note 1, at 5.

<sup>107</sup> Guyana Response, *supra* note 1, at 5.

of infringement and whether there has been an interference with government functions.”<sup>108</sup> Guatemala adopted a similar stance, indicating that “a State participating in a specific cyber operation violates a country’s sovereignty if, in the course of a cyber attack, it takes certain information from another State’s cyber realm, even when no harm that could affect equipment or the human rights of a person or persons is caused.”<sup>109</sup>

**42.** Other States’ responses were quite equivocal. Peru simply cited sovereignty as “one of the fundamental pillars of international society” without opining on its status as an independent rule.<sup>110</sup> Ecuador suggested that the “rule” authorizing States to control their own cyber infrastructure “does not prevent a state from engaging in cyber operations” without offering an opinion on whether it might regulate how they do so vis-à-vis other sovereign States.<sup>111</sup>

**43.** Chile’s response described sovereignty as a “principle” that “States carrying out cyber operations must always take ... into account.”<sup>112</sup> Thus, “every time a state considers carrying out a cyber operation, it must consider ensuring it does not affect the sovereignty of another.”<sup>113</sup> The use of “principle” may suggest something other than a concrete rule, although the use of “must” creates a more obligatory expectation. Moreover, Chile did suggest that:

every state has an obligation to respect the territorial integrity and independence of other states and must faithfully discharge its international obligations, including as regards the principle of nonintervention. Cyber operations that hinder another state from exercising its sovereignty therefore constitute a violation of that sovereignty and are prohibited under international law.<sup>114</sup>

The last sentence suggests sovereignty might constitute a stand-alone rule unless one reads the reference to intervention with another State’s exercise

<sup>108</sup> *Id.*

<sup>109</sup> Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 3.

<sup>110</sup> Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 6-7.

<sup>111</sup> Ecuador Response, *supra* note 1, at 2.

<sup>112</sup> Chile Response, *supra* note 1, at 5.

<sup>113</sup> *Id.*

<sup>114</sup> *Id.*

of sovereignty as equivalent to the *domaine réservé* protected by the duty of non-intervention.<sup>115</sup>

**44.** The U.S. position is murkier. In 2014, then-legal adviser Harold Koh indicated that “State sovereignty . . . must be taken into account in the conduct of activities in cyberspace, including outside of the context of armed conflict.”<sup>116</sup> It is not clear, however, whether taking “State sovereignty . . . into account” signals U.S. recognition of sovereignty as a standalone rule. In his own speech in 2016, then-Legal Adviser Brian Egan made clear that “remote cyber operations involving computers or other networked devices located on another State’s territory do not constitute a per se violation of international law.”<sup>117</sup> At the same time, he conceded that “[i]n certain circumstances, one State’s non-consensual cyber operation in another State’s territory could violate international law, even if it falls below the threshold for the use of force.” In any case, Egan indicated that “[p]recisely when a non-consensual cyber operation violates the sovereignty of another State is a question lawyers within the U.S. government continue to study carefully, and it is one that ultimately will be resolved through the practice and opinio juris.”<sup>118</sup> This might suggest that the United States may accept the idea of sovereignty-as-rule in principle, albeit without much clarity on its contours or contents. Most recently, the General Counsel for the U.S. Department of Defense declined to adopt this view: “[f]or cyber operations that would not constitute a prohibited intervention or use-of-force [i.e., those that might be covered by a rule of sovereignty], the Department believes there is not sufficiently widespread and consistent State practice resulting from a sense of legal obligation to conclude that customary international law generally prohibits such non-consensual cyber operations in another State’s territory.”<sup>119</sup>

<sup>115</sup> See note 98.

<sup>116</sup> Koh, *supra* note 1, at 596; *Accord 2014 US GGE Submission*, *supra* note 1, at 737; 2016 US GGE Submission, *supra* note 1, at 825.

<sup>117</sup> Egan, *supra* note 1, at 818. Among other things, Egan indicated that the United States does engage in intelligence collection activities overseas and that such activities may violate the domestic laws of other States, but that there is no “per se prohibition on such activities under customary international law.” *Id.*

<sup>118</sup> *Id.* at 819.

<sup>119</sup> See Paul C. Ney, *DOD General Counsel Remarks at U.S. Cyber Command Legal Conference* (March 2, 2020), at <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/2099378/dod-general-counsel-remarks-at-us-cyber-command-legal-conference/>. It is

**45.** A discussion among 16 Member States’ representatives under “Chatham House rules”<sup>120</sup> on June 23, 2020 reinforced the current diversity of viewpoints on the sovereignty question. Several participants called for affirming the “sovereignty-as-rule” view for cyberspace, violations of which would trigger international legal responsibility. Others, however, expressed more skepticism about the value of such efforts; one participant suggested that there may be too many meanings for the term “sovereignty” to ascribe it a rule-like status. Another participant viewed the “sovereignty debate as a distraction” while a third explicitly suggested a need to “rethink” its meaning in the cyber context.

### Question 9

Does due diligence qualify as a rule of international law that States must follow in exercising sovereignty over the information and communication technologies in their territory or under the control of their nationals?

**46.** Due diligence is a principle of international law that requires a State to respond to activities that it knows (or reasonably should know) have originated in its territory or other areas under its control and that violate the right(s) of another State.<sup>121</sup> It is an obligation of effort, not result – where a State knows or should know of the conduct, it must employ “all means reasonably available” to redress it.<sup>122</sup> As a principle, due diligence currently regulates State behavior

not clear, however, whether Ney was expressing views for the United States as a whole, or, if the position was just that of the U.S. military, an ambiguity that also exists with respect to the French Ministry of Defense Views. See *supra* note 101.

<sup>120</sup> Chatham House, *Chatham House Rule*, at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/chatham-house-rule> (“When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.”).

<sup>121</sup> See, e.g., *Corfu Channel Case; Assessment of Compensation (United Kingdom v. Albania)* [1949] ICJ Rep. 22 (April 9). *Trail Smelter Case (United States-Canada)*, UNRIIA, vol. III, 1905 (1938, 1941).

<sup>122</sup> See *Application of the Convention on the Protection and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bosnia v. Serbia)* (Judgment) [2007] ICJ Rep. 1, 430.

in a number of contexts, most notably international environmental law, where it is the basis for requiring States to stop pollution in their territory that serves as a source for transboundary harm to other States' territories.

**47.** Like sovereignty, there are competing views on whether due diligence is a requirement of international law in cyberspace. The 2015 UN GGE report listed it among the "voluntary" norms of responsible State behavior rather than listing it under applicable international law principles.<sup>123</sup> The Netherlands and France's Ministry of Defense have characterized it as a legal rule in cyberspace.<sup>124</sup> In doing so, however, the Netherlands noted that "not all countries agree that the due diligence principle constitutes an obligation in its own right under international law" and the United States is widely thought to be among those contesting its status as such.<sup>125</sup> The ninth question thus sought to obtain Member State views on the status of due diligence with respect to a State's obligations under international law in cyberspace.

**48.** Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Guyana, and Peru all took the position that the due diligence principle is a part of the international law that States must apply in cyberspace.<sup>126</sup> As Chile explained, "[f]rom a cyber-operations stand-

<sup>123</sup> 2015 UNGGE, *supra* note 1, at 13, 26-28.

<sup>124</sup> French Ministry of Defense Views, *supra* note 101, at 10 ("Under the due diligence obligation, States should ensure that their sovereign domain in cyberspace is not used to commit internationally unlawful acts. A State's failure to comply with this obligation is not a ground for an exception to the prohibition of the use of force, contrary to the opinion of the majority of the Tallinn Manual Group of Experts."); The Netherlands Views, *supra* note 101, Appendix, at 4 ("the due diligence principle requires that states take action in respect of cyber activities: - carried out by persons in their territory or where use is made of items or networks that are in their territory or which they otherwise control; - that violate a right of another state; and - whose existence they are, or should be, aware of"). Although it did not describe due diligence as a specific rule of international law, Estonia has catalogued its contents as a requirement for State behavior. Kersti Kaljulaid, President of Estonia, *President of the Republic at the opening of CyCon 2019* (May 29, 2019), at <https://www.president.ee/en/official-duties/speeches/15241-president-of-the-republic-at-the-opening-of-cycon-2019/index.html> ("Estonian Views") ("states have to make reasonable efforts to ensure that their territory is not used to adversely affect the rights of other states. They should strive to develop means to offer support when requested by the injured state in order to identify, attribute or investigate malicious cyber operations. This expectation depends on national capacity as well as availability, and accessibility of information:").

<sup>125</sup> The Netherlands Views, *supra* note 101, Appendix, at 4.

<sup>126</sup> Chile Response, *supra* note 1, at 6-7; Ecuador Response, *supra* note 1, at 2; Guatemala

point, a state must exercise due diligence to prevent its sovereign territory, including the cyber infrastructure under its control, from being used to carry out cyber operations that affect another state's rights or could have adverse consequences for them."<sup>127</sup> Guatemala adopted a similar stance, while noting that since "cyberspace" is such a broad term, performing due diligence can be extremely complicated.<sup>128</sup> Still, to the extent due diligence "derives from the principle of sovereignty," Guatemala opined that "each State should exert the control necessary to halt all harmful activities within its territory and be obliged to take preventive measures, establish a CERT, adopt information security policies, and raise awareness about information security."<sup>129</sup>

**49.** Bolivia offered a more equivocal response. Without opining one way or another on the legal status of due diligence, it did opine that a State may not be held responsible for a cyberattack when it lacks technological infrastructure to control a non-State actor.<sup>130</sup> This view could be consistent with having due diligence as an international legal rule for cyber operations as due diligence generally has required States to "know" about the activities in question, which may not be possible for States lacking the requisite technical infrastructure.<sup>131</sup> On the other hand, the inability to "control" cyber activities of which it has knowledge might suggest Bolivia does not accede to the due diligence doctrine in cyberspace. Without further clarification of Bolivia's response, it is difficult to reach a conclusion one way or another. Similarly, prior public U.S. statements have not addressed the international legal status of due diligence directly. It is notable, however, that the United States has tended to describe any obligations to respond to requests for assistance in non-binding terms.<sup>132</sup>

Response, *supra* note 1, at 4; Guyana Response, *supra* note 1, at 5; Peru Response, *supra* note 1, at 7.

<sup>127</sup> Chile Response, *supra* note 1, at 6-7. Ecuador simply stated: "due diligence is applicable to what happens with technological resources within national territory." Ecuador Response, *supra* note 1, at 2.

<sup>128</sup> Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 4.

<sup>129</sup> *Id.* at 2, 4.

<sup>130</sup> Bolivia Response, *supra* note 1, at 3-7.

<sup>131</sup> See *Tallinn 2.0*, *supra* note 20, at 40.

<sup>132</sup> 2014 US GGE Submission, *supra* note 1, at 739 ("A State *should* cooperate, in a manner consistent with domestic law and International obligations, with requests for assistance from other States in investigating cybercrimes, collecting electronic evidence, and mitigating malicious cyber activity from its territory:").

The lack of any public U.S. endorsement of due diligence as a legal rule in either the GGE context or elsewhere may be indicative of U.S. doubts as to its legal status.

**50.** In the June 2020 Chatham House discussion, several Member States expressed support for due diligence as an (important) rule of international law in the cyber context. However, one Member State’s representative did express some hesitation about endorsing due diligence given the risk of non-compliance that might occur for States unable to adequately respond to cyberthreats because of a lack of technical capacity.

### Question 10

Are there other rules of international law that your government believes are important to highlight in assessing the regulation of cyber operations by States or actors for which a State is internationally responsible?

**51.** The final, tenth, question invited States to identify additional areas of international law on which the Committee should focus improving transparency in the cyber context. Responses focused on different issues. Bolivia called for more attention to protecting people’s “fundamental rights” wherever they operate, including in cyberspace.<sup>133</sup> Several other responses focused on cybercrime, particularly the Council of Europe’s Budapest Convention.<sup>134</sup> Others emphasized the contributions of the *Tallinn Manuals*.<sup>135</sup>

**52.** Two States – Ecuador and Guyana – indicated that there may be a need for new international law in the cyber context. Ecuador emphasized establishing how “to regulate attacks against military and/or civilian targets that affect the

<sup>133</sup> Bolivia Response, *supra* note 1, at 6-7.

<sup>134</sup> Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 4; Bolivia Response, *supra* note 1, at 6-7.

<sup>135</sup> Costa Rica Response, *supra* note 1, at 2 (emphasizing Costa Rican interest in joining the Budapest Convention); Guatemala Response, *supra* note 1, at 4 (citing the Budapest Convention).

huge sections of the population, such as the case of critical infrastructure, hospitals, public transportation, and other infrastructure affecting state security.”<sup>136</sup> Guyana suggested that “it might be prudent to have a set of international law principles that are tailored to the special nature of cyberspace,” noting that existing legal principles were developed for a different time and context.<sup>137</sup>

**53.** In the June 2020 Chatham House consultations, multiple Member States called for more attention to the duty of non-intervention (and the question of what cyber activities constitute coercion). Several participants echoed a call for more attention to legal issues “below” the use of force threshold set by the UN Charter’s Article 2(4) prohibition. Others suggested less focus on issues of international peace and security in favor of more attention to the application of international human rights law to cyberspace. Additional topics receiving attention included diplomatic law, the principle of good faith, countermeasures, and the standards of proof for attribution of cyber operations to a State.

**54.** Finally, at least one participant called for developing a distinctly Latin American perspective on the international governance and legal framework of cyberspace. The participant noted how most ideas on international law in cyberspace have been developed by European States, or scholars from the Global North. Instead of duplicating existing efforts (e.g. UN GGE, UN OEWG, etc.), Latin American countries could build on these foundations to develop a Latin American framework for understanding international law in cyberspace based on a shared political culture of democratic institutions and Ibero-American history. The OAS was cited as the ideal venue for articulating such a shared vision.

<sup>136</sup> Ecuador Response, *supra* note 1, at 3.

<sup>137</sup> Guyana Response, *supra* note 1, at 5-6 (emphasizing anonymity as a particular challenge to applying existing law).

## Resolution CJI/RES. 259 (XCVII-0/20)

97<sup>th</sup> Regular Session OEA/Ser. Q

3 - 7 August 2020

Virtual session 7 August 2020

Original: Spanish

THE INTER-AMERICAN JURIDICAL COMMITTEE,

BEARING IN MIND that the OAS General Assembly, through resolution AG/RES. 2930 (XLIX-O/19) "International Law", in point i on "Observations and recommendations on the Annual Report of the Inter-American Juridical Committee," requested the CJI to permanently report on progress regarding the topics included in its agenda, such as matters related to cyber security;

AWARE of the need to provide OAS Member States with clear parameters on the application of international law to cyberspace, thereby limiting the risks of escalation or involuntary conflict;

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT the document "International Law and Cybernetic Operations of the State: Improving Transparency - Fifth Report", document CJI/doc. 615/20, presented by Dr. Duncan B. Hollis, rapporteur of the topic,

RESOLVES:

**1.** To thank Dr. Duncan B. Hollis for his work as rapporteur on the subject and for the presentation of said report.



**2.** Based on the proposals in the aforementioned report, to recommend to the General Assembly that it support the applicability of international law to state operations in cyberspace through the approval of the following statement:

The OAS General Assembly affirms that international law, including the United Nations Charter in its entirety, the OAS Charter, international humanitarian law, international human rights law, the duty of non-intervention, the sovereign equality of states, and the law of state responsibility, is applicable to the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) by States and those for whom States are internationally responsible.

**3.** To request the Department of International Law, in its capacity as Technical Secretariat of the Inter-American Juridical Committee, to present to the CJI a proposal to support or undertake training activities for various actors on the application of international law to cyberspace.

**4.** To keep the theme on its agenda and broaden its scope beyond the themes of international law related to international peace and security to encompass other international legal regimes.

This resolution was unanimously approved at the regular session on the 7th August 2020, in the presence of the following members: Drs. Luis García-Corochano Moyano, Eric P. Rudge, Mariana Salazar Albornoz, José Antonio Moreno Rodríguez, Milenko Bertrand-Galindo Arriagada, Duncan B. Hollis, Alix Richard, George Rodrigo Bandeira Galindo, Miguel A. Espeche-Gil, Íñigo Salvador Crespo and Ruth Correa Palacio.

## The Organization of American States

The Organization of American States (OAS) is the world's oldest regional organization, dating back to the First International Conference of American States, held in Washington, D.C., from October 1889 to April 1890. At that meeting the establishment of the International Union of American Republics was approved. The Charter of the OAS was signed in Bogotá in 1948 and entered into force in December 1951. The Charter was subsequently amended by the Protocol of Buenos Aires, signed in 1967, which entered into force in February 1970; by the Protocol of Cartagena de Indias, signed in 1985, which entered into force in November 1988; by the Protocol of Managua, signed in 1993, which entered into force on January 29, 1996; and by the Protocol of Washington, signed in 1992, which entered into force on September 25, 1997. The OAS currently has 35 member states. In addition, the Organization has granted permanent observer status to a number of states, as well as to the European Union.

The essential purposes of the OAS are: to strengthen peace and security in the Hemisphere; to promote and consolidate representative democracy, with due respect for the principle of nonintervention; to prevent possible causes of difficulties and to ensure peaceful settlement of disputes that may arise among the member states; to provide for common action on the part of those states in the event of aggression; to seek the solution of political, juridical, and economic problems that may arise among them; to promote, by cooperative action, their economic, social, and cultural development; and to achieve an effective limitation of conventional weapons that will make it possible to devote the largest amount of resources to the economic and social development of the member states.

The Organization of American States accomplishes its purposes by means of: the General Assembly; the Meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs; the Councils (the Permanent Council and the Inter-American Council for Integral Development); the Inter-American Juridical Committee; the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights; the General Secretariat; the specialized conferences; the specialized organizations; and other entities established by the General Assembly.

The General Assembly holds a regular session once a year. Under special circumstances it meets in special session. The Meeting of Consultation is convened to consider urgent matters of common interest and to serve as Organ of Consultation under the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Rio Treaty), the main instrument for joint action in the event of aggression. The Permanent Council takes cognizance of such matters as are entrusted to it by the General Assembly or the Meeting of Consultation and implements the decisions of both organs when their implementation has not been assigned to any other body; it monitors the maintenance of friendly relations among the member states and the observance of the standards governing General Secretariat operations; and it also acts provisionally as Organ of Consultation under the Rio Treaty. The General Secretariat is the central and permanent organ of the OAS. The headquarters of both the Permanent Council and the General Secretariat are in Washington, D.C.

Member States: **Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, The Bahamas** (*Commonwealth of*), **Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica** (*Commonwealth of*), **Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, United States, Uruguay, and Venezuela.**

© Organization of American States

ISBN 978-0-8270-7125-4



OAS

COMISSÃO JURÍDICA INTERAMERICANA  
COMITÉ JURÍDICO INTERAMERICANO  
INTER-AMERICAN JURIDICAL COMMITTEE  
COMITÉ JURIDIQUE INTERAMÉRICAIN