Self-defense against IS – Is International Law Changing?

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A. Contentious Conduct: Facts and Claims

B. Self-defense

I. Claims of Self-defense

1) Individual self-defense against IS and/or Khorasan

USA (23 Sept. 2014)
UK (8 Sept. and 26 Nov. 2015)
Turkey (24 July 2015)
France (after Paris attacks of 13 Nov. 2015)

2) Collective self-defense of Iraq


II. Are these claims covered by the law of self-defense under Art. 51 UN-Charter? Is self defense allowed against non-state armed attacks?

1. The openness of Art. 51 UN Charter (ICJ, Nicaragua (1986) para. 176)

2. The reluctance of the ICJ in its case law

ICJ, Oil platforms (2003); Wall opinion (2004); Congo v. Uganda (2005).


a) General duty to prevent harm emanating from a state's own territory (neminem laedere)?
- ICJ, Corfu Channel (1949).

b) Prior failure to comply with obligation to suppress, imposed by SC

c) Duties with regard to terrorist activities
- Obligations to prevent and protect.
- Obligations to apprehend and prosecute.

d) Legally relevant omissions of Syria?

No, because not able. Anyway omissions can never reach threshold (?).

a) Policy arguments against allowing self-defense against non-state actors, without any link to a state
- “Collateral damage“ in the territorial state, infringement of its sovereignty.
- Danger of abuse.
- Danger of escalation.


5. Which qualifications? Has a lex specialis emerged?
- See Art. 21, 50(1)a), 55 ILC Articles (2001).
- But unclear whether we are looking for loose criteria of attribution or independent of attribution to State.

b) Application of Art. 8 and 9 ILC Articles State Responsibility (2001) on attribution?
c) New concepts:
- “substantial involvement”? (cf. Art. 3 lit. (g) Definition of Aggression (1974))
- “harbouring”? (cf. UN SC-Res. 1368, para. 3).
- “Aiding and abetting” (Art. 16 ILC Articles: “complicity”).
- complete loss of effective control of State over territory (cf. German letter of 2015 to SC).

- “manifestly unable or unwilling” (USA; Turkey; Australia)? Problems:
  (1) “Necessity” is no free-standing basis of authorization.
  (2) Too vague.
  (3) What if willing, but unable? (as Syria here). Obligation to consent and cooperate?

Legal consequence:
→ Forfeiture of Syrian sovereignty and territorial integrity/estoppel/”ungoverned space” in some areas of the State? (cf. German letter to SC of 10 Dec. 2015 (S/2105/946).

III. How would the evolution of the law on self-defense take place (technically)?

1. Extensive interpretation of Art. 51 UN Charter?
   Subsequent practice in terms of Art. 31 (3) lit b VCLT?

2. New customary rule?
   - Time needed for formation of new custom?
   - Silence as acquiescence?

3. Specific problem of change of a norm of ius cogens
   Art. 2(4) and Art. 51 UN Charter
C. UN SC Res. 2249 of 20 Nov. 2015

(1) No mention of Chapter VII!
(2) Only “Calls upon…” (para. 5)
(3) Reference: “in compliance with international law“ (para. 5).

Legal opinion of Academic Service of the German parliament (Bundestag): “Resolution 2249 may be interpreted as confirming that States can invoke the right of self-defense against the IS, without being obliged to refer to a (further) consent by the Iraqi or Syrian government” (Wissenschaftlicher Dienst, WD 2 – 3000 – 203/15, 21).

7565th session SC: statements of all other states present (China, Spain, Russia, Lithuania, Jordan, New Zealand, Chile, Angola and Bolivia): Ambiguous.

D. Invitation/consent

1) Iraq
Cannot dispose of Syrian integrity.

2) Syrian invitation of Russia
Forfeiture of the right to invite? Because above threshold of full-fledged civil war? Because of loss of support of own population? Because of massive human rights violations?
But: if Syria is qualified as „unable“, then it must be allowed to enable itself.

E. Conclusion: Has a normative shift occurred after 9/11 (2001), and again after 2014?

(1) Only a few states explicitly invoke self-defense.
(2) Reactive statements by non-participating states: Vague, rarely legality claims.
(3) Protest and objections by Russia, Ecuador, Iran, Argentina, (China).
(4) Silence of all other states, no acquiescence. No obligation to protest, because no clear claims.

Should academics and counselors press in favour of developing the law further?
- Weighing of interest of victim states versus “harbouring” states: Effective protection versus recipe for escalation and abuse (see Turkey!).
- Insisting on the role and responsibility of the Security Council and the system of collective security. “Responsibility not to veto”.
→ Advising governments to protest, or not to protest, or to issue approving statements.

References