1. Introduction

Some 70 years after the first and, so far the only, criminal prosecutions pertaining to the ‘supreme international crime’ took place, the activation of the – long dormant – jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC) over the crime of aggression appears imminent. At the time of writing, 32 States Parties had ratified the Kampala Amendments on the Crime of Aggression, thus exceeding the 30 ratifications required for the Court to exercise jurisdiction pursuant to Articles 15bis(2) and 15ter(2) of the ICC Rome Statute (RS). The moment of truth will arrive somewhere after 1 January 2017, when the Assembly of States Parties will need to adopt a decision (by consensus or at least by a two-thirds majority) affirming the Court’s jurisdiction.

As the activation of Articles 8bis, 15bis and 15ter RS is drawing ever nearer, the debate over the prosecution of the crime of aggression – which had never really disappeared – has again taken off with renewed vigour. Illustrative in this regard is an article by Harold Koh and Todd Buchwald – respectively former Legal Adviser and former Assistant Legal Adviser to the US Department of State – in the 2015(3) issue of the American Journal of International Law in which the authors identify several shortcomings and uncertainties in the Kampala Amendments, which they urge should be addressed ahead of the activation of the Court’s jurisdiction.

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1 International Military Tribunal (Nuremberg), Judgment and Sentences, October 1, 1946, reproduced in (1947) 41 AJIL, p. 172, at 186.

2 Note: 12 people were found guilty of crimes against the peace at the Nuremberg trial, and another 25 at the Tokyo trial. Two more defendants were convicted on this basis in the follow-up trials at Nuremberg based on Control Council Law No. 10. G. Werle & F. Jęβberger, Principles of International Criminal Law (2014), p. 1445. On other prosecutions touching upon crimes against the peace that were conducted in the wake of the Second World War, see: R. Clark, ‘The Crime of Aggression’, in C. Stahn (ed.), The Law and Practice of the International Criminal Court (2015), p. 778, at 795.


4 Note: Palestine was the 30th State Party to ratify the amendments. In light of the ongoing debate over the status of Palestine vis-à-vis the Rome Statute, this temporarily led to questions as to whether the submission by Palestine of its instrument of accession of the Kampala Amendment on 26 June 2016 ought to be counted towards the necessary quorum of 30 ratifications (answering in the affirmative, see: A. Zimmerman, ‘29+1 = 30 – The Kampala Amendment on the Crime of Aggression and the Recent Accession by Palestine’, EJIL:Talk!, 29 June 2016, available at <http://www.ejiltalk.org/29-1-30-the-kampala-amendment-on-the-crime-of-aggression-and-the-recent-accession-by-palestine>, last visited 20 January 2017). As of late 2016, however, the Kampala Amendments had also been ratified by Chile and the Netherlands, with several other States Parties to the Rome Statute reportedly in the process of ratifying the amendments.

5 Statute of the International Criminal Court, UN Doc A/Conf.183/9 (1998) (hereinafter Rome Statute), Art. 15bis(3) Rome Statute: ‘[t]he Court shall exercise jurisdiction over the crime of aggression in accordance with this article, subject to a decision to be taken after 1 January 2017 by the same majority of States Parties as is required for the adoption of an amendment to the Statute.’; Art. 121(3) Rome Statute.

article gave rise inter alia to an outspoken rebuke in the same journal – in unusually strong language⁷ – by Alain Pellet, who denounced (most of) the reservations uttered by Koh and Buchwald as ‘paradoxical, if not pathetic’. Pellet accused both of ‘tilting at windmills’ by drawing attention to artificial or ancillary questions, while observing that the inflation of issues of minor or superficial importance also suggested a ‘kiss of death’ ambition,⁸ i.e. an underlying agenda to derail the process notwithstanding the Kampala consensus.

Various flaws and imperfections of the Kampala Resolution have attracted substantial scholarly attention, including, for instance, the controversial amendment procedure chosen at Kampala, the referral to the UN General Assembly Definition of Aggression,⁹ or the elusiveness of the requirement that an act of aggression should ‘by its character’ constitute a ‘manifest’ violation of the UN Charter (Article 8bis(1) Rome Statute). The present essay will not engage with these criticisms, but will instead focus on the argument made by some (whether explicitly or implicitly) that the crime of aggression is inherently non-justiciable, on the one hand, as well as the critique that the activation of the ICC’s jurisdiction over the crime of aggression will have a detrimental effect by inspiring (highly politicized) prosecutions of alleged ‘aggressors’ before the national courts of third States – prosecutions which are allegedly incompatible with the par in pares non habet imperium axiom. The validity of each critique is briefly explored in Section 2. Section 3 concludes.

2. After Kampala – questions of justiciability, complementarity and immunity

What’s done, cannot be undone (Shakespeare, Macbeth)

2.1. Aggression, a crime like no other?

Underlying much of the debate pertaining to the ICC’s jurisdiction over the crime of aggression is a lingering feeling with certain scholars and policy-makers that aggression is a crime like no other and accordingly cannot be treated in a similar fashion as the so-called ‘atrocity crimes’ (war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity). Key in this context are the distinguishing features of the crime of aggression as a ‘leadership crime’, which can be committed only by the political and military leaders of a State (whereas atrocity crimes can be committed also by lower-ranking officials and/or by (members of) non-State groups), and, most fundamentally, the fact that it necessarily presupposes a prior finding that the State has committed a breach of international law, notably by committing an ‘act of aggression’ (whereas atrocity crimes do not require a prior finding of State responsibility). Accordingly, it is argued that third States cannot and should not engage in domestic prosecutions against alleged ‘aggressors’, since this would imply that they would sit in judgment over their sovereign equals, in breach of the fundamental principle of par in pares imperium non habet. Nor should an international court do so, inter alia because the founding fathers of the United Nations allegedly intended to reserve the competence to find the existence of an ‘act of aggression’ for the UN Security Council.

While we will briefly come back to these elements below, it is submitted that the different perception of aggression is perhaps better explained, not so much by the alleged distinguishing features mentioned above, but rather by the ‘procedural’ component of the rules governing the recourse to force. After all, military interventions that would otherwise be contrary to Article 2(4) UN Charter will in principle not give rise to illegal conduct if they are approved by the UN Security Council, acting under Chapter VII of the Charter, or by the territorial State’s de jure authorities. Within certain limits, the territorial State can indeed consent to military intervention on its soil (but not, for instance, many would argue, if the goal is to support a government involved in a civil war).¹⁰ What is more, military interventions can be sanctioned, not only by

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⁷ It is noted, however, that the American Journal of International Law has had its fair share of scholarly duels e.g. over the legality of the use of force. For a personal favourite, see Farer’s response to D’Amato with regard to the permissibility of pro-democratic intervention:


⁹ GA Res. 3314 (XXIX), 14 December 1974.

the territorial State (the ‘victim’ – so to speak), but also by the UN Security Council. The Council can indeed sanction a variety of military interventions, whether of a humanitarian or ‘pro-democratic’ nature (including interventions leading to regime change) – although it arguably cannot sanction territorial annexation or purely punitive forcible actions. Clearly, this is fundamentally different for atrocity crimes, the commission of which can under no circumstances be ‘authorized’ by the UN Security Council (or State authorities). Accordingly, and perhaps sub-consciously, the rules governing the use of force are to a certain extent perceived not to be of the same ‘fundamentally norm-creating’ character as, say, the rules prohibiting genocide or torture. After all, the argument goes, should we truly regard a political leader as being guilty of the crime of aggression, ‘merely’ because a single permanent member prevented a military intervention from being authorized by the Security Council (whereas a different vote would have meant there would not have been any wrongful conduct on the part of the intervening State to begin with)?

Added to this is the perverse tendency on the part of those on the sidelines to surgically detach the political decision-making process leading up to the launch of a military intervention from the destruction, loss of life (among civilians AND combatants) and other mayhem (e.g. political chaos, economic breakdown, ...) that frequently follows – a tendency that is all the stronger where certain consequences are further removed in time from the beginning of the intervention and/or the causal link with the intervention is less firmly established. This is also reflected in the dominant normative account which views the crime of aggression as a wrong against a foreign State, a political crime, which plays exclusively at the ‘macro’ level and which ‘yields an abstract harm’, rather than as a compound of wrongs against individuals (civilians and combatants), that entails ‘the slaughter of human life, the infliction of human suffering, and the erosion of human security.’

In the end, the sobering conclusion is that various scholars continue to believe that aggression should not be regarded as an international crime at all, let alone as the ‘supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.’ These persistent sentiments call for some observations in relation to issues of justiciability, complementarity and immunity.

2.2. Persistent opposition to the crime of aggression’s justiciability

Inasmuch as they were adopted by consensus at the plenary meeting of the (then 111-Member) ICC Assembly of States Parties, one might have expected the Kampala Amendments to be the final word on the inherent justiciability of aggression as a crime under international law, and to put to rest critiques that the ICC is fundamentally incompetent to prosecute crimes of aggression. Clearly, this has not been the case. Koh and Buchwald, for example, recently reiterated the view that ‘[a]ggression determinations are fundamentally different in kind [from determinations of atrocity crimes]: they fundamentally require a political assessment and political management.’ And, in the words of Rostow, ‘[d]eterminations of aggression are political and rightly so.’

Comments such as these are reminiscent of the Nicaragua case, where the United States went to great lengths to demonstrate that the Court was unfit to assess the legality of the US intervention in Nicaragua.
Despite having itself brought cases involving the use of force before the ICJ in the 1950s, the US indeed claimed at the time of the proceedings that the case involved an inherently political problem that was not appropriate for a judicial solution. According to the State Department: ‘The [ICJ] was never intended to resolve issues of collective security and self-defence and is patently unsuited for such a role.’ As is well known, the Court rejected these objections and proceeded to a ruling on the merits. Since then, the Court has in several cases pronounced directly or indirectly on the compatibility of State conduct with the rules governing the use of force – as have a number of arbitral tribunals. What is more, while respondent States have continued to raise various challenges to admissibility in these cases, e.g. pertaining to the indispensable parties requirement (on which, see also infra) or the difficulties concerning the collection of evidence, the allegedly ‘political’ nature of the dispute has no longer been raised in contentious cases before the ICJ. It is firmly established then – and rightly so – that the legality of a State’s recourse to (armed) force is not automatically removed from judicial scrutiny, but can be judged by an international court or tribunal (provided, of course, that its jurisdiction has been duly consented to). It is somewhat puzzling then why, if States can be found to incur international responsibility for breaching the prohibition on the use of force (and, arguably, for committing ‘acts of aggression’), some still find it opportune to contest that it is possible for an international court to pronounce on an individual’s criminal responsibility for the crime of aggression.

This is all the more so inasmuch as the post-War precedent of criminal prosecution of individual ‘aggressors’ long predates the first finding of State responsibility for a breach of the prohibition on the use of force. At a press briefing following the Kampala conference, the then US Legal Adviser Harold Koh actually took pride in the fact that ‘as the country of Nuremberg prosecutor Justice Jackson, we are the only country that has successfully prosecuted the crime of aggression’. The United States did not seem to think back in 1945-1946 that aggression was inherently political and non-justiciable. Rather, the United States supported the prosecution of Nazi leaders for crimes against the peace in spite of serious concerns at the time as to the compatibility of these prosecutions with the *nullum crimen sine lege* principle. Again, it is puzzling then to see how some continue to explicitly or implicitly question the justiciability of the crime.

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19 A point which the Court could not resist from highlighting in the *Nicaragua* case: ‘It is relevant also to observe that while the United States is arguing today that because of the alleged ongoing armed conflict between the two States the matter could not be brought to the International Court of Justice but should be referred to the Security Council, in the 1950s the United States brought seven cases to the Court involving armed attacks by military aircraft of other States against United States military aircraft; the only reason the cases were not dealt with by the Court was that each of the Respondent States indicated that it had not accepted the jurisdiction of the Court (...).’ *Case concerning Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States)*, Judgment (admissibility) of 26 November 1984, ICJ Reports (1984), p. 392, at para. 97.
21 *Nicaragua*, supra note 19, paras. 91-99.
24 Note: occasionally, States have invoked the allegedly ‘political’ character of a request for an advisory opinion from the ICJ to challenge the admissibility of such a request. It is established case law of the ICJ, however, that ‘the fact that a question has political aspects does not suffice to deprive it of its character as a legal question. Whatever its political aspects, the Court cannot refuse to respond to the legal elements of a question which invites it to discharge an essentially judicial task, namely (...) an assessment of an act by reference to international law.’ See e.g., *Accordance with international law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo, Advisory Opinion of 22 July 2010*, ICJ Reports (2010), p. 415 (and the case law cited). See also ibid., para. 35 (in relation to the Court’s discretion to refuse a request for an advisory opinion: ‘Nor does the Court consider that it should refuse to respond to the General Assembly’s request on the basis of suggestions (...) that its opinion might lead to adverse political consequences.’).
25 The first such finding can be found in the 1986 *Nicaragua* Judgment (supra note 19). In the *Corfu Channel* case, the Court simply found the United Kingdom responsible for having violated Albania’s sovereignty (supra note 22, p. 36).
27 Note: Some prosecutors involved in the post-war proceedings nonetheless later admitted to having conflicting feelings about their participation in the prosecution of crimes against the peace, in particular in light of the fact that the Allied Powers had done ‘some of the very things’ they were prosecuting the leaders of the Axis powers for. See e.g. Esbrook, ‘Exempting Humanitarian Intervention from the ICC’s Definition of the Crime of Aggression: Ten Procedural Options for 2017’, (2015) 53 VII, p. 791, at 799, note 43.
of aggression when the international criminal nature of (wars of) aggression has in the meantime been affirmed in a variety of international instruments29 (remedying earlier concerns pertaining to the nullum crimen principle) and considering that the UK House of Lords, for instance, in 2006, confirmed that ‘the core elements of the crime of aggression [are] understood (…) with sufficient clarity to permit the lawful trial (…) of those accused of this most serious crime.’30 In the end, the large majority of legal doctrine agrees that the crime of aggression is an international crime with individual responsibility.31

Some scholars do not go as far as to argue that the crime of aggression is inherently non-justiciable – which presupposes a disavowal inter alia of the Nuremberg precedent –, but instead present what one could call ‘light’ versions of the justiciability critique. Thus, it is argued that only the Security Council can determine the existence of a State ‘act of aggression’, which is a prerequisite for finding a crime of aggression. A variant holds that the ICC is incompetent to judge sovereign States. Others insist that the ICC is prohibited from examining the legality of the conduct of non-consenting States. Still others draw the policy card and claim that the political risk is too great for the International Criminal Court to meddle with ‘questions of ultimate power’ (to paraphrase Dean Acheson).32 Each of these reservations merits brief consideration.

A first ‘light’ version of the justiciability critique holds that prosecution over the crime of aggression should be possible only after a prior determination by the Security Council that a State ‘act of aggression’ has been committed. The underlying argument again is that such prosecution presupposes a proper finding of a State ‘act of aggression’, a competence which ‘the Charter has traditionally assigned to the Security Council’33 – put differently, a competence which the founding fathers of the UN allegedly intended to reserve to the UN Security Council.34 In a nutshell, leaving aside the fact that Security Council resolutions referring to ‘acts of aggression’ remain rare and that no such resolution has been adopted since 1990,35 such interpretation ascribes to Article 39 UN Charter a meaning which the founding fathers of the UN never intended. Article 39 UN Charter is an institutional provision, which determines the situations in which the Security Council may decide to take enforcement action. Such enforcement action is not limited to situations where there has been a prior breach of international law. A ‘threat to the peace’, for instance, does not necessarily presuppose the occurrence of internationally wrongful conduct (States do not incur international responsibility for committing ‘threats to the peace’ …). In a similar vein, the determination of an ‘act of aggression’ by the Security Council has always been regarded as a fundamentally political,  


30 UK House of Lords, R. v. Jones, Judgment of 29 March 2006, [2006] UKHL 16, para. 19. The House of Lords rectified an earlier ruling of the Court of Appeal which held, by reference to the ongoing difficulties in the negotiations on the jurisdiction of the ICC for crimes of aggression, that it was difficult to see ‘how it can be said that there is (…) a firmly established rule of international law which establishes a crime of aggression which can be translated into domestic law (…) where there is no consensus as to an essential element of the crime.’ Court of Appeal for England and Wales, Jones et al., (2004) EWCA 1981, paras. 42-43.

31 See: P. Wrangle, ‘The crime of aggression, domestic prosecutions and complementarity’, in C. Kreß & S. Barriga (eds.), The Crime of Aggression: a Commentary, Vol. I (2017), pp. 704-751, at 708 (with further references) [‘Most, if not all, commentators agree that the crime of aggression already is an international crime with individual responsibility.’ Wrangle also observes that ‘during the negotiating process, no state disputed the status of the crime of aggression as an international crime.’].


33 Koh & Buchwald, supra note 6, p. 263.

34 See in this sense, the statements by France and China in explanation of their position before the adoption of Resolution RC/Res.6 on the crime of aggression at the Kampala conference, reproduced in Barriga & Kreß, supra, note 3, p. 811 (France: ‘In article 15 bis, paragraph 8, the text restricts the role of the United Nations Security Council and contravenes the Charter of the United Nations under the terms of which the Security Council alone shall determine the existence of an act of aggression.’), p. 814 (China).

35 For rare examples, see e.g. SC Res. 573(1985), 4 October 1985; SC Res 577(1985), 6 December 1985. Straitpas identifies 34 Security Council resolutions adopted between 1973 and 1990 containing a determination of an (act of) aggression. Twenty-eight of these resolutions were addressed at the apartheid regimes of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia. The last finding of an ‘aggressive act’ dates back to Resolution 667(1990) (following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait). Since then, there have been only two Presidential Statements making a passing reference to the concept of ‘aggression’ (UN Doc. S/PRST/2005/10, 2 March 2005; UN Doc. S/PRST/2006/4, 25 January 2006).

rather than a judicial, finding, let alone that the absence of such a determination should a priori preclude an actual judicial organ from inquiring into the legality of a State’s recourse to force. This has been amply affirmed in the case law of the ICJ (it may be noted that, even at the time of the post-War prosecutions, no one seemed to think that prosecutions pertaining to crimes against the peace presupposed some form of formal approval by the newly-established UN Security Council). As mentioned before, the ICJ has on several occasions examined the compatibility of State conduct with the Charter and/or customary rules on the use of force. More generally, the ICJ has repeatedly asserted that, in accordance with Article 24 UN Charter, the Security Council’s competence in relation to the maintenance of international peace and security is not ‘exclusive’. This non-exclusive character is also borne out by the fact that the UN General Assembly has on numerous occasions pronounced on the legality of inter-State uses of force. It follows that the pre-Kampala debate as to whether a Security Council determination that an act of aggression has been committed should be a precondition for the ICC to exercise jurisdiction is better regarded as a policy debate. In the margin, there is, moreover, something fundamentally paradoxical in the position of some, such as Koh, who, one the one hand, reject a formalist reading of the UN Charter, based on a ‘statist’ understanding of State sovereignty that would preclude humanitarian interventions by individual States absent authorization from the UN Security Council, while nonetheless hiding behind the primacy of the UN Security Council when it comes to the justiciability of the crime of aggression.

A second version holds that the determination of an ‘act of aggression’ should belong to the Security Council, not because it is inherently political, but rather because, as Pellet, for instance, emphasizes, ‘it is not the ICC’s function to judge sovereign States’. Article 1 RS effectively makes clear that the ICC has ‘the power to exercise its jurisdiction over persons for the most serious crimes of international concern’. No reference is made to possible jurisdiction vis-à-vis States. Article 25(4) RS moreover adds that ‘no provision in this Statute relating to individual criminal responsibility shall affect the responsibility of States under international law’.

At the same time, the critique of Pellet and others is not fully convincing. Clearly, when the ICC (or an ad hoc international criminal tribunal) is called upon to examine whether a private individual, in particular a member of a non-State armed group, has committed atrocity crimes, it is not judging sovereign States. Indeed, while the conduct of the individual concerned may or may not be imputable to a State, in such scenarios the ICC (or ad hoc tribunal) need not, and arguably should not, take a position on the matter, ‘since its jurisdiction is criminal and extends over persons only’. Nonetheless, it is evident that whenever the ICC is determining whether a State organ (be it a low-ranking soldier or a political or military leader) has committed genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity, even if it is not explicitly pronouncing on the matter, it is indirectly/de facto making a finding of State responsibility as well – for the simple reason that the conduct of State organs is in principle imputable to the State, even if it is ultra vires. It may moreover

36 N. Krisch, ‘Article 39’, in B. Simma et al. (eds), The Charter of the United Nations: a Commentary, Vol. II (3rd ed., 2012), p. 1272, at para. 44. Note: the distinction between ‘threats to the peace’, ‘breaches of the peace’ and ‘acts of aggression’ was inspired in part by a desire to distinguish between situations where the Security Council would be ‘obliged to act’, and those where the Council would be free to choose whether or not to take action. In the end, however, the drafters of the Charter chose to grant the Security Council the greatest possible freedom in deciding on the existence of either of these thresholds and on deciding whether or not to take action. Suggestions to define the concept of an ‘act of aggression’ were dismissed. The United Nations Conference on International Organization. Selected Documents (1946), pp. 763-764.
37 See the cases cited supra, note 22.
41 Pellet, supra note 8, p. 562.
be observed in this context that, like aggression, genocide and crimes against humanity are by nature crimes that presuppose the collective involvement of a multitude of individuals, including the involvement of persons in a leadership position.44 Pellet recognizes as much, by admitting that the ICC may well be called upon to judge an individual accused of genocide whose conduct is imputable to the State. Yet, he insists that there is a significant difference, in that ‘the Charter expressly confers on the Security Council the responsibility to determine the existence of an act of aggression, whereas it does nothing of the kind concerning genocide’.45 Thus, Pellet eventually falls back on the previous argument, according to which the responsibility to determine the existence of an act of aggression, whereas it does nothing of the kind concerning genocide.

Further, see: Akande, supra note 39.

44 Consider e.g. Coracini & Wrange, supra note 40, pp. 314-315 (suggesting that the atrocity crimes ‘are usually (albeit not necessarily) committed on behalf of or with the involvement of a state’ and that state involvement is a ‘common factor’); Wrange, supra note 31, p. 714.

45 Pellet, supra note 8, p. 562.

46 See on this: Akande, supra note 39, pp. 16-17; Coracini & Wrange, supra note 40, pp. 312 et seq.

47 In a similar vein, see e.g.: Coracini & Wrange, supra, note 40, p. 308.

48 Art. 6 of the Charter of the International Military Tribunal (82 UNTS 280) defines ‘crimes against peace’ as the ‘planning, preparation, initiation or waging of a war of aggression, or a war in violation of international treaties, agreements or assurances, or participation in a common plan or conspiracy for the accomplishment of any of the foregoing.’


51 Further, see: Akande, supra note 39.
the ‘Monetary Gold’ principle, according to which an international court must abstain from deciding a case where the rights and obligations of a non-consenting third State form ‘the very subject-matter’ of the case. A few cursory observations are in order. First, even if we were to assume that the Monetary Gold principle applies when the ICC is exercising jurisdiction over the crime of aggression on the basis of Article 15bis RS (State referral or proprio motu), it must be recalled that the Rome Statute and the Kampala Amendments contain a range of mechanisms that restrict the Court’s jurisdiction in respect of non-consenting aggressor States. The cumulative impact of these provisions is that the ICC is prevented from exercising jurisdiction on the basis of State referral or proprio motu where the aggressor State is not a party to the Rome Statute, or where it is a State Party that has lodged an opt-out declaration pursuant to Article 15bis(4) RS. Second, if the relevant provisions are interpreted as permitting the ICC to exercise jurisdiction pursuant to Article 15bis RS when the aggressor State has not ratified the Kampala Amendments or lodged an opt-out declaration (specifically, where the victim State has ratified the amendments), is the Monetary Gold principle infringed? Akande, for one, takes the view that, in light of Article 121(5) RS, such (aggressor) State must indeed be regarded as a ‘non-consenting State’, and answers in the affirmative. Against this view, it may be questioned whether a State Party to the Rome Statute, which has deliberately refrained from lodging an opt-out declaration can be regarded as ‘non-consenting’ for present purposes (even if it has not ratified the Kampala Amendments), and/or whether such a State’s rights and obligations form ‘the very subject-matter’ of the case before the ICC. A parallel can arguably be drawn with the advisory jurisprudence of the ICJ. On the one hand, the ICJ has stated that ‘the lack of consent of an interested State may render the giving of an advisory opinion incompatible with the Court’s judicial character’, in particular when this would have ‘the effect of circumventing the principle that a state is not obliged to allow its disputes to be submitted to judicial settlement without its consent’. On the other hand, the ICJ has never refused to render an advisory opinion due to a lack of consent, even in cases (such as the Palestinian Wall case), where the Court undeniably pronounced on the rights and obligations of individual States. In the ICJ’s Peace Treaties Opinion, this approach was ostensibly justified by reference to the ‘advisory’ character of the Court’s opinions and the fact that they have ‘as such, (…) no binding force’. It must be conceded that the PCJI has on one occasion refused to render an advisory opinion due to a lack of consent, notably in the Eastern Carelia case, which involved an ongoing dispute between Finland and the Soviet Union. Yet, this different approach in the Eastern Carelia case can be explained by the fact that the PCJI was asked to pronounce on the rights and obligations of the Soviet Union, which was not a Member of the


54 Arguing that the principle applies to ICC prosecutions proprio motu or based on State referral, see: Akande, supra note 39, pp. 17 et seq. (note, Akande concedes that no problems arise pursuant to the Monetary Gold principle in the case of Security Council referral (ibid., pp. 35-38). Arguing that the principle does not apply, see e.g. Wrone, supra note 31, pp. 712-714; McDougall, supra note 50, p. 245; Coracini & Wrane, supra note 40, p. 315 (questioning whether the principle applies to international criminal courts and tribunals).

55 See in particular Art. 15bis(4) Rome Statute (allowing for States Parties to ‘opt out’ of the ICC’s jurisdiction in respect of the crime of aggression), Art. 15bis(5) Rome Statute (‘In respect of a State that is not a party to this Statute, the Court shall not exercise its jurisdiction over the crime of aggression when committed by that State’s nationals or on its territory.’), in conjunction with Art. 121(5) Rome Statute (‘In respect of a State which has not accepted the amendment, the Court shall not exercise its jurisdiction regarding a crime committed by the amendment when committed by that Party State’s nationals or on its territory.’). For a schematic overview, see McDougall, supra note 50, p. 261.


57 According to Akande, when finding a State act of aggression, the Court would find itself in a manner which was practically no different to determining an inter-State dispute’. Akande moreover draws attention to Art. 121(5) RS, according to which amendments to the Rome Statute will enter into force only for those States which accept the amendment).


59 Palestinian Wall, supra note 22.

60 In a similar vein, Akande, supra note 39, p. 23.

61 Interpretation of Peace Treaties with Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, Advisory Opinion of 30 March 1950, ICI Reports (1950), p. 65, at 71. In a similar vein, see: ITLOS, Request for an Advisory Opinion submitted by the Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC) (‘Request for Advisory Opinion submitted to the Tribunal’), Advisory Opinion of 2 April 2015, Case No. 21, para. 76.
League of Nations to begin with. For present purposes then, it could be argued that whenever the ICC exercises jurisdiction under Article 15bis RS in connection with an aggressor State that is a State Party to the Rome Statute, but which has not ratified the Kampala Amendments nor lodged an opt-out declaration, the situation is more akin to the Peace Treaties scenario than to the Monetary Gold or the Eastern Carelia scenario. The reason for this is twofold. First, the aggressor State is a State Party to the ICC Rome Statute and has agreed, as a matter of principle, to the exercise of the jurisdiction of the Court in respect of the crime of aggression pursuant to Article 5(2) Rome Statute. Second, as is also confirmed by Article 25(4) RS, a finding of an ‘act of aggression’ by the ICC has – to paraphrase the Peace Treaties Opinion – ‘no binding force’ of its own for the aggressor State. In the end, it must be emphasized that the critique relating to the ‘consent problem’ does not challenge the justiciability of the crime of aggression as such, nor the authority of the ICC to adjudicate the crime, but only challenges the ‘scope’ of the ICC’s jurisdiction.

Finally, it is no secret that the activation of the Court’s jurisdiction over the crime of aggression may inject it in treacherous political waters, and may test its legitimacy and credibility. Koh and Buchwald illustrate this by reference to the hypothetical scenario of two warring States, finally ready to sign a peace treaty, yet each insisting on assurances that their leaders will not be prosecuted for having started the war. The authors question whether ‘claims of justice [should] obstruct peace’. At the same time, it is difficult to see how this situation is fundamentally different from the conclusion of a peace agreement ending a non-international armed conflict and providing for broad amnesty for war crimes. Both scenarios raise similar questions pertaining to the permissibility and international recognition of amnesties. Of course, the likelihood that the prosecution of ‘aggressors’ will provoke political reactions is overall greater than with the prosecution of atrocity crimes. Yet, as is the case for the other reservations discussed above, this is a difference in degree, not a difference in nature. The political exposure is not exclusive to the crime of aggression. The previous record of the ad hoc tribunals and the ICC indeed suggests that the prosecution of high-ranking officials, including sitting Heads of State, for crimes against humanity, can be just as politically sensitive as the prosecution of the leader of a (State or non-State) armed group for genocide. Yet, in these cases, the justiciability of the crimes concerned is not fundamentally in dispute, and the (potential) political backlash is not generally seen as a valid reason why the international community should tolerate impunity in perpetuum. Why, then, should it be different for the crime of aggression?

2.3. Complementarity and immunity

An important reason why some have expressed concern over the Kampala Resolution and the impending activation of the ICC’s jurisdiction over the crime of aggression concerns the ‘spill-over’ effect to the national level, in particular the fact that a growing number of States may adopt domestic legislation criminalizing the crime of aggression. States may do so in order to make sure, in accordance with the complementarity principle, that political or military leaders can be tried before their own national courts, rather than face justice in The Hague. If such a prosecution at the national level of one’s own nationals – unlikely though it may be – does not give rise to objections, the prospect of States establishing and exercising similar criminal jurisdiction vis-à-vis nationals of third States is highly controversial. Since the adoption of the Kampala Resolution, eight countries have effectively (at the time of writing) adopted amendments to their

63 In a similar vein, Akande, supra, note 39, p. 24.
64 Thus, Coracini and Wrange note that ‘the “very subject-matter” of a criminal judgment would remain a verdict against an individual’. Coracini & Wrange, supra note 40, p. 316; Wrange, supra note 31, p. 713.
65 Koh & Buchwald, supra note 6, p. 274.
66 Ibid.
67 On amnesty for war crimes, see e.g. Y. Naqvi, ‘Amnesty for war crimes: defining the limits of international recognition’, (2003) 85 IRRC, No. 851, p. 583.
68 For a more elaborate rebuke of suggestions that the crime of aggression is ‘different’ or ‘special’ in comparison to the other core crimes, see: Coracini & Wrange, supra note 40, pp. 307-350 (see in particular pp. 331 et seq. in respect of the ‘political’ character of the crime of aggression). See also: M.P. Scharf, ‘Universal jurisdiction and the crime of aggression’, (2012) 53 Harvard ILJ, p. 357, at 382 (noting that the concerns are ‘not unique to the crime of aggression’).
69 Koh & Buchwald, supra note 6, p. 274.
Criminal Code, incorporating the crime of aggression. What is more, all of these provisions explicitly or implicitly use the Rome Statute definition as the international standard reference (albeit that there are also major differences between the various provisions). Influenced by civil society campaigns, other countries may well follow suit.

It is clear that the crime of aggression does not easily fit with the ICC’s complementarity concept. Indeed, whereas prosecutions of political or military leaders suspected of international crimes before their own national courts have generally been the exception, rather than the rule, it is particularly naïve to expect a proliferation of prosecutions against suspected ‘aggressors’ before their own national courts. Thus, while several countries had domestic provisions criminalizing aggression well before the Kampala conference, the crime of aggression has remained a paper tiger ever since the last of the Nuremberg proceedings. Since 1949, there has not been a single indictment on this basis. In Germany, the Federal Public Prosecutor rejected requests to commence criminal proceedings against members of the government in relation to the German participation in Operation Allied Force, as well as for granting the US and its allies in the 2003 Iraq war overflight rights and allowing them to transport troops and supplies through Germany. Similarly, requests to instigate criminal proceedings against government members for involvement in the Iraq war were declared inadmissible in Spain and Belgium. The Statute of the ‘Iraqi Special Tribunal’ did include among the bases for jurisdiction ‘the threat of war or the use of the armed forces of Iraq against an Arab country, in accordance with Article 1 of [Iraqi] Law Number 7 of 1958, as amended’ (Article 14(c) of the Statute) (a reference to ‘aggression’ was carefully avoided in light of the contested legal basis of the US-led intervention). Eventually, however, Saddam Hussein was hanged before a case under Article 14(c) got underway.

In all, the trend towards greater parliamentary involvement (at least in Western liberal States) in decisions pertaining to the deployment of armed forces abroad, as well as to a growing degree of post facto political accountability, has not translated into greater judicial scrutiny of government decisions relating to military

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71 The countries concerned are Luxembourg, Slovenia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Ecuador, Samoa, Austria and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. A. Coracini, ‘[Extended] Synopsis: The Crime of Aggression under Domestic Criminal Law’, in Kreß & Barriga, supra note 49, pp. 1038, 1040-1041. Coracini finds 38 States and two regional organizations that have adopted legislation related to aggression, including nine post-Kampala examples of national provisions on the crime of aggression. She also refers to another six States expected to adopt national legislation (at the time of writing).

72 Ibid., p. 1071.

73 Even if the matter did not receive much attention in the negotiations leading up to the Kampala conference, the application of the complementarity principle to the crime of aggression raises a number of delicate issues. One source of concern pertains to the possibility of ‘incomplete concurrence’ if a domestic court were to prosecute atrocity crimes, but not the crime of aggression. See on this: Van Schaack, supra note 70.


80 This trend is illustrated by the ‘Davids Commission’ (in the Netherlands), the Chilcott Inquiry (in the UK), and various other national inquiries into the Iraq war. See e.g.: the Netherlands, Commissie van Onderzoek Irak, Rapport Commissie van Onderzoek Besluitvorming Irak (2010), available at <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2010/01/12/rapport-commissie-davids> (last visited 21 January 2017). On the UK’s Iraq Inquiry (or ‘Chilcott Inquiry’), see <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/> (last visited 21 January 2017).
intervention abroad (save in Germany), let alone in criminal prosecutions against possible ‘aggressors’. The growing number of domestic criminal codes incorporating the crime of aggression are unlikely to alter this. National courts are indeed traditionally reluctant to review ‘battlefield decisions’, especially when they concern high-ranking officials. According to Lord Hoffman, ‘the making of war and peace and the disposition of the armed forces has always been regarded as a discretionary power of the Crown into the exercise of which the Courts will not enquire’. The same aversion is echoed in the ruling of the US Court of Appeals in the El-Shifa Pharmaceutical Plant case: ‘Courts are not a forum for second-guessing the merits of foreign policy and national security decisions textually committed to political branches’. And even if the coming to power of a new government may exceptionally pave the way for national prosecutions against former political or military leaders with blood on their hands, there is a further reason why such prosecutions – in spite of the catharsis effect they might occasionally produce – are even more unlikely with regard to the crime of aggression, than with regard to atrocity crimes, or at least atrocity crimes committed in the context of a non-international armed conflict. The reason for this is that a national court finding a (former) leader guilty of aggression would ipso facto also be recognizing the country’s international responsibility vis-à-vis the victim State. Such a self-incriminating effect hardly makes prosecution at the national level an attractive option (especially inasmuch as a breach of the jus ad bellum makes a State liable for all consequences that could reasonably be foreseen at the outset, and may thus result in a liability that is exponentially larger than with regard to grave breaches of the law of armed conflict that are imputable to the State).

It follows from the foregoing that, contrary to what is the case for the atrocity crimes, the complementarity principle is not perceived as an escape route, or a safety valve, to avoid proceedings against one’s nationals before the ICC in respect of the crime of aggression. This is one of the factors explaining why States chose to introduce various restrictions to prevent the Court from prosecuting leaders from non-consenting States for the crime of aggression (save in the scenario of a Security Council referral). These ‘consent-based’ mechanisms do not come into play, of course, with regard to domestic proceedings against nationals of third States who are suspected of having committed the crime of aggression. Although no such precedents have yet occurred since the late 1940s, several scholars have expressed concerns over the growing number of criminal codes criminalizing aggression and, concomitantly, the increased likelihood of proceedings against alleged aggressors before the national courts of victim States and other third States. Such proceedings are perceived to contravene the fundamental principle of sovereign equality and are feared to engender serious implications for international relations and international peace and security.

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81 The German case is fairly unique in that the Constitutional Court has on multiple occasions verified whether the executive branch complied with its duty to have military operations approved by Parliament. See, for example: Germany, Judgment of the Bundesverfassungsgericht of 7 May 2008, 2 BvE 1/03, Absatz-Nr. (1-92) (finding that the engagement of German AWACS aircraft in the NATO operation ‘Display Deterrence’ should have been authorized by Parliament); Judgment of the Bundesverfassungsgericht of 23 September 2015, 2 BvE 6/11, ECLI:DE:BVerfG:2015:es20150923.2bve000611 (finding that the government was not obliged to retrospectively seek the Bundestag’s approval of the completed evacuation of German citizens from Libya in early 2011).

82 In a similar sense: Wrange, supra note 31, pp. 721, 724-725.


86 See supra, note 55 and the accompanying text.

87 According to Clark, ‘[i]n terms of state practice, what must have been victim state jurisdiction was exercised by the Republic of China in Nanking against Japanese generals in at least three cases, notably that of Takashi Sakai. Poland exercised what was either victim state or universal jurisdiction in the Greiser case. The USSR convicted numerous German generals for illegal activity that included crimes against peace.’ Clark, supra note 2, p. 795. See also: Van Schaack, supra note 70, pp. 137-141, 144-145.


89 E.g., Koh & Buchwald, supra note 6, p. 275. Strapatsas even goes as far as to suggest (unconvincingly) that the desire to domestically prosecute the aggressor could motivate an aggressed state to prolong an armed conflict. Strapatsas, supra note 88, p. 473. Note: in relation to possible prosecution before the national courts of third States other than the victim State, there has also been considerable debate as to whether the crime of aggression lends itself to the exercise of universal jurisdiction. This debate is beyond the scope of the present paper. Writing in 2012, Van Schaack for one concludes that ‘current law does not provide strong support for the exercise of domestic jurisdiction over the crime of aggression, a fortiori, pursuant to universal jurisdiction’ (although she concedes
This was also the position of the ILC in its 1996 draft Code of Crimes against the Peace and Security of Mankind. The ILC indeed took the view that jurisdiction over the crime of aggression ought to rest exclusively with an international criminal court, with the exclusion of national courts – save for the national courts of the State whose leaders allegedly participated in the act of aggression.

In the wake of the Kampala Review Conference, several proposals have been made, including some ranging from the unproductive to the absurd, to take measures prior to the activation of the ICC’s jurisdiction in order to eliminate or mitigate the risks of domestic prosecution before the courts of third States (including one proposal which would have the ICC Chief Prosecutor issue an official statement ‘discouraging domestic incorporation’ of the crime of aggression). Others, however, have instead expressed sympathy for the victim’s interest in holding third-State leaders responsible for crimes of aggression.

In the present author’s view, the prospect of criminal proceedings in Tehran against Israeli leaders with regard to military operations in Gaza or in southern Lebanon is hardly appealing, as is, for that matter, the prospect of criminal proceedings in Kiev, conducted in absentia, against Russian leaders pertaining to the annexation of Crimea. For present purposes, however, we will limit ourselves to some cursory observations.

It is correct that the prosecution of non-nationals for the crime of aggression before domestic courts is at first sight difficult to reconcile with the principle of sovereign equality and the par in parem axiom – as was also acknowledged by the ILC in the Commentary to the 1996 Draft Code of Crimes against the Peace and Security of Mankind. First, inasmuch as a crime of aggression presupposes a State act of aggression, such proceedings indeed imply that the domestic courts of one country sit in judgment upon the State acts of other countries. Such conduct would appear to be at odds with State immunity from jurisdiction, which also – as the ICJ confirmed – extends to grave breaches of international law and to breaches of peremptory norms. Second and related, the prosecution of individual ‘aggressors’ would also seem to be at odds with the immunity ratione materiae of State officials.

As far as the latter immunity is concerned, it is clear that, inasmuch as the crime of aggression is a ‘crime of leaders’, which can be committed only by ‘a person in a position effectively to exercise control over or to manage the (derived) immunity that it remains to be seen if the trend will change ‘now that a consensus definition of the crime has emerged’). Van Schaarack, supra note 70, pp. 144-145. At the same time, it is observed that various national criminal codes effectively foresee the application of forms of extraterritorial jurisdiction ‘that clearly are or could be understood as forms of universal jurisdiction to the crime of aggression’ (Coracini, supra note 71, pp. 1068-1069). Arguing that ‘the Nuremberg trial and its progeny crystallized the right under customary international law of states to exercise universal jurisdiction’ over the crime of aggression, see: Scharf, supra note 68. In a similar vein, Wrange, supra note 31, pp. 718-720.

91 Ibid., Art. 8, see also paras. 14-15 of the Commentary to Art. 8. According to the ILC, the prosecution of an individual for the crime of aggression by the national courts of the State concerned could be ‘essential to a process of national reconciliation’. Moreover, such prosecution ‘would not have the same negative consequences for international relations or international peace and security’, as national courts of such a State could determine the responsibility of a leader for the crime of aggression ‘without being required to also consider the question of aggression by another State’.
92 See Veroff, supra note 88, pp. 764-765. Veroff proposes four possible interventions: ‘The States parties should (1) establish exclusive ICC jurisdiction or primacy over the crime of aggression; (2) urge the ICC’s Chief Prosecutor to issue an official statement discouraging domestic incorporation; (3) encourage domestic prosecutions for ordinary crimes instead of aggression; and (4) generate a multactor list to guide domestic prosecutions to avoid the most problematic prosecutions and mitigate the associated harms.’
93 E.g. Pellet, supra note 8, p. 564. According to Clark, ‘many members of the SWGCA were comfortable with victim state (…) jurisdiction’. Clark, supra note 2, p. 795.
94 As well as, in those common-law countries practising it, with the act-of-State doctrine.
96 E.g. Koh & Buchwald, supra note 6, p. 274; Van Schaarack, supra note 70, p. 149.
dimension in relation to the State is at odds with the facts.\textsuperscript{99} As noted above, whenever national courts pronounce on the individual criminal responsibility of an official (or former official) from a third State for, say, war crimes, they are de facto taking a stance on the responsibility of the latter State (since the conduct of the official is in principle imputable to that State, even if conducted ultra vires).\textsuperscript{100} It follows that such a prosecution creates the same tension with the par in pares principle which the prosecution of the crime of aggression before the national courts of third States ostensibly gives rise to. What is more, under the UN Convention against Torture (CAT) and the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearances (CED), the official character is a constitutive element of the prohibited acts which States are required to criminalize and prosecute.\textsuperscript{101} In spite of this, there is undoubtedly a degree of support in legal doctrine, as well as in State practice, for the view that (former) high-ranking officials – other than those endowed with absolute personal immunity during their time in office – cannot hide behind their material immunity from jurisdiction to escape prosecution for various international crimes, such as torture and genocide.\textsuperscript{102} By way of illustration, ‘Draft Article 7’, put forward by ILC Special Rapporteur Escobar Hernández in her Fifth Report on the immunity of State officials from foreign criminal jurisdiction expressly states that immunity shall not apply in respect of ‘[g]enocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, torture and enforced disappearances’.\textsuperscript{103} Of course, the assumption here is also that the prosecution of foreign officials for certain international crimes is not incompatible with State immunity from jurisdiction either. In other words, the (unspoken) assumption is that even if the conviction of a foreign official by a national court for an international crime entails a de facto finding of State responsibility, such a finding does not of itself give rise to a breach of State immunity. Why, then, would this be different in respect of the crime of aggression? As mentioned before, it has been argued in this context that the crime of aggression is different – even from those crimes, such as enforced disappearances under the CED, where the official character is an indispensable element – because the national court would be pronouncing explicitly/directly, instead of implicitly/indirectly, on the responsibility of a third State. Whether such an intermediary finding, which does not have direct legal consequences for the third State, qualifies as an exercise of jurisdiction vis-à-vis the latter State, in breach of its immunity from jurisdiction, is open to debate.\textsuperscript{104} If the answer would be positive, a breach of State immunity could arguably be avoided by abandoning the two-tier approach put forward in Article 8bis RS, and instead adopting national legislation defining the crime of aggression in a manner that ‘merges’ the

\textsuperscript{99} See ibid., paras. 121-126. See also ibid., paras. 61-77 (referring inter alia to the fact that, under the 1984 Convention against Torture, ‘the official status of the act is an undeniable component of torture’). While a divergent view holds that the perpetration of a crime under international law cannot be qualified as an official act, but must be treated as a private act for which no immunity is accorded, Kreicker observes that: ‘this artificial attempt to set aside state immunity, which has rightly been rejected by the ICJ and by a clear majority in literature, ignores the obvious fact that crimes under international law are typically committed in the exercise of military and police power – that is, sovereign power’. See: H. Kreicker, ‘Immunities’, in Kreß & Barriga, supra note 31, pp. 675-703, at 680 (with further references in respect of both opposite views). In a similar vein: Scharf, supra, note 68, pp. 383-384.

\textsuperscript{100} Pro memorie: the Convention against Torture (CAT) defines ‘torture’ as ‘any act by which severe pain or suffering (…) is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.’ (emphasis added) (Art. 1(1)). Art. 2 of the Convention on Enforced Disappearances (CED) defines enforced disappearance as ‘the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law’ (emphasis added). Both Conventions require States Parties to exercise jurisdiction on the basis of the territoriality principle, the active personality principle and permit the exercise of jurisdiction on the basis of the passive personality principle. In addition, in respect of alleged offenders present on the State’s territory, both Conventions establish an ‘out dedere, aut judicare’ duty. Art. 5 CAT, Art. 9 CED.

\textsuperscript{101} Further: see R. Pedretti, Immunity of heads of State and State officials for international crimes (2014). Note that this argument is not limited to international crimes for which there is an explicit treaty obligation to exercise some form of criminal jurisdiction (in particular torture and enforced disappearances), but is also made in respect of crimes where no such treaty exists (as yet) (e.g., crimes against humanity). See also: Kreicker, supra note 99, p. 681 (‘State practice supports a customary international law exception to the general functional immunity in cases of crimes under international law, as is evidenced by many court decisions. A clear majority in scholarly writing also supports the existence of such an immunity exception.’). The contrary view was nonetheless defended inter alia by former ILC Special Rapporteur Roman Kolodkin. See ibid., pp. 682-683.


\textsuperscript{103} Uncertainty remains as to the threshold for qualifying State conduct as an exercise of ‘jurisdiction’ vis-à-vis another State from an immunity perspective. For an analysis, see e.g. N. Angelet, ‘Les juges belges face aux actes des organisations internationales’, in A. Lagerwall (ed.), Les juges belges face aux actes adoptés par les Etats étrangers et les organisations internationales (2016), pp. 13-51.
individual conduct and the collective act (similar to what is the case for the definitions of torture and enforced disappearances in the CAT and the CED). This is, for instance, the approach adopted in Article 13 of the Arab Draft Model Law for the Crimes falling within the jurisdiction of the ICC, as well as in several older national laws criminalizing aggression/aggressive war. It is admitted, however, that recent national legislation often adopts the two-step approach of Article 8bis RS. On a different note, while an in-depth assessment of immunity law is beyond the scope of the present paper, it is worth observing that States are not necessarily consistent in their approach with respect to the jurisdictional immunity of States and foreign officials, and their deference to the para in parem axiom. By way of illustration, while the US position would seem to be that it enjoys jurisdictional immunity before foreign courts with regard to a US drone strike killing a taxi driver in Pakistan, with regard to weapons supplies to Syrian rebel groups, or with regard to its military interventions in Syria and elsewhere, its Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act (FSIA) contains an exception in respect of countries which the US Department of State has unilaterally decided to qualify as ‘state sponsors of terrorism’. The so-called ‘terrorism exception’ to the FSIA would permit litigation against the Syrian regime for providing funds to Hezbollah, and has, for instance, been used to seize USD 2 billion in Iranian assets inter alia because of Iranian funding and assistance to Islamic Jihad in Gaza.

The main message here is again that the crime of aggression is not fundamentally or intrinsically different from various other international crimes, which (when committed by (former) State organs) may equally qualify as ‘acts performed in an official capacity’, but which part of this legal doctrine can be prosecuted without giving rise to insurmountable obstacles from an immunities perspective.

In the end, even if the complementarity principle may constitute an incentive for domestic legislation, the peripheral problem pertaining to the possibility and prospect of domestic prosecution against non-nationals over the crime of aggression transcends the treaty context of the ICC Rome Statute and the activation of the ICC’s jurisdiction with respect to this crime. It is a general international law problem that merits greater attention in particular in the context of the International Law Commission’s ongoing work on the immunity of State officials.

As mentioned above, in her Fifth Report on the immunity of State officials from foreign criminal jurisdiction of June 2016, ILC Special Rapporteur Escobar Hernández takes the view that material immunity does not apply in respect of [g]enocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, torture and enforced disappearances. Interestingly, the crime of aggression is not included in the list, thus signalling that, in
the Special Rapporteur’s view, a customary international law exception to immunity has not yet emerged in respect of this crime. The Special Rapporteur cites several reasons to account for this:

‘the Court’s jurisdiction over this crime is optional and not automatic, as is the case with the other international crimes; the Commission itself already indicated in the draft Code of Crimes against the Peace and Security of Mankind of 1996 that the crime of aggression must be entrusted primarily to international courts and tribunals, given the political implications it could have for the stability of relations between States; there are very few pieces of national criminal legislation that address this crime; and, lastly, there do not appear to be any cases of State practice in which the crime of aggression has been characterized as a limitation or an exception to the exercise of immunity, at either the legislative or the judicial level.’

The reasoning of the Rapporteur is only partially convincing. It seems to ignore that there have been at least a few examples of victim State jurisdiction over the crime of aggression, and that the number of criminal codes incorporating the crime of aggression is on the rise (and that these criminal codes constitute State practice suggesting that material immunity does not necessarily apply to the crime of aggression).

Whether or not the crime of aggression is eventually included in the list of acts for which the immunity shield is pierced may well have a significant impact on the debate in legal doctrine, and on future State practice. At the time of writing, there appeared to be little appetite among the ILC members for removing immunity for crimes of aggression. It also remains to be seen how a future ILC Draft will be received in the Sixth Committee of the UN General Assembly. Whatever the outcome, it is submitted that the controversy concerning the possible prosecution of the crime of aggression at the national level should not be allowed to weigh in on, let alone derail, the final activation of the ICC’s jurisdiction. Pro memorie, several countries criminalized aggression at the domestic level long before the adoption of the Rome Statute. Furthermore, as ‘Understanding 5’ adopted by the Assembly of States Parties in 2010 (pursuant to a US proposal) stresses, the Kampala Amendments should ‘not be interpreted as creating the right or obligation to exercise domestic jurisdiction with respect to an act of aggression committed by another State’. This is all that needs to be said on the matter in the ICC context.

3. Concluding thoughts

At least symbolically, the full activation of the ICC jurisdiction over the crime of aggression will be a defining moment in the development of the international legal order, completing a process that was started in Versailles at the end of the First World War and which reached its point of no return at the 2010 Kampala Review Conference. It is surprising to see then how lukewarm (or downright critical) many (if not most) international lawyers are about the prospect of the ICC prosecuting alleged ‘aggressors’. The reasons for this lukewarm reception are manifold of course. They include inter alia concerns about the definitional uncertainties left open by the Kampala definition of aggression, scepticism about the competence and

112 Note: In theory, Draft Art. 7 put forth in the Fifth Report of Special Rapporteur Escobar Hernández would nonetheless seem to leave the door open for the exercise of jurisdiction over alleged aggressors by the victim State through the so-called ‘territorial tort exception’. Para. 1(iii) of the Draft Article indeed suggests that immunity will not apply to ‘[c]rimes that cause harm to persons, including death and serious injury, or to property, when such crimes are committed in the territory of the forum State and the State official is present in said territory at the time that such crimes are committed.’ (ibid., pp. 88-89, 95). Given the Special Rapporteur’s position on the crime of aggression elsewhere in the report (see infra), it seems unlikely that this opening was deliberate. In any case, it would appear to be absurd to permit victim State jurisdiction over alleged aggressors, but only vis-à-vis State officials who were present in the territory of the victim State at the time the crime was committed.

113 Ibid., para. 222.

114 For the contrary position, according to which there is no immunity ratione materiae in respect of the crime of aggression, see e.g. Kreikker, supra note 99, pp. 683-684; Wrange, supra note 31, p. 723.

115 See supra, note 87.

116 Based on the presentation by ILC Rapporteur Concepcion Hernandez during a presentation on 15 December 2016 in Ghent (conference on International Immunities: Law in a State of Flux?).

117 Resolution RC/Res.6, supra, note 3, Annex III, ‘Understanding regarding the amendments to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court on the Crime of Aggression’. Consider also: Werle & Jeβberger, supra note 2, p. 1491 (stating that the Understanding was to make clear that ‘for the crime of aggression, in contrast to the other core crimes, the principle of complementarity does not aim for the most comprehensive domestic prosecution possible’). According to Van Schaack, the Understandings express ‘a subtle preference that the states parties do not incorporate the crime into their domestic codes’. Van Schaack, supra note 70, pp. 135, 159-161.
authority of the ICC judges to interpret and apply the international legal framework governing the use of force, concerns over the collection of evidence, etc. Many scholars also see the ICC’s jurisdiction over the crime of aggression as a Trojan horse, fearing that the exercise of such jurisdiction will erode the legitimacy of, and political support for, the Court (a prospect that is particularly dire at a time when the ICC is suffering an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy inter alia in the wake of the South African withdrawal from the Rome Statute in October 2016). The latter position brings to mind the concern expressed in the wake of the ICJ’s Nicaragua case—which led the United States to revoke its declaration accepting compulsory jurisdiction—that the Court’s entry into the realm of ‘high politics’ would harm its prestige and negatively impact its caseload. In reality, however, it seems that the opposite has proved true. Criticism of pro-Western bias on behalf of the ICJ has faded and several countries have brought cases before the Court which either directly involved the use of force or which dealt with boundary disputes in situations of armed conflict. Whether the same will be true for the International Criminal Court only time can tell.

The present essay does not pretend to provide an answer to all (or even most) of the concerns pertaining to the impending activation of the ICC’s jurisdiction over the crime of aggression. Instead, we have essentially limited ourselves to two points. First, we have taken aim at the lingering argument that the crime of aggression is inherently non-justiciable, as well as at ‘light’ versions of this justiciability critique (which hold, for instance, that only the Security Council can determine the existence of (an act of) aggression, or that the ICC should refrain from judging sovereign States—even if only indirectly). Second, we have taken a closer look at claims that the activation of the ICC’s jurisdiction over the crime of aggression simultaneously creates an incentive for the prosecution of alleged aggressors at the national level (and for the introduction of domestic legislation paving the way for such prosecutions) in a manner which is incompatible with the international immunities of States and foreign officials. Here, we argued that the possibility of such domestic prosecutions transcends the treaty context of the ICC Rome Statute. It is a general international law problem that merits greater attention in particular in the context of the ILC’s ongoing work on the immunity of State officials. It should not, however, be allowed to derail the final activation of the ICC’s jurisdiction.

The activation of the jurisdiction over the crime of aggression is bound to present the ICC and, specifically the ICC Prosecutor, with daunting challenges. Perhaps the most fundamental obstacle consists of the lingering taboo that envelopes the notion of the ‘crime of aggression’. This taboo is evident from the dominant, but flawed, perception that aggression is no more than a wrong against a foreign State, a political crime, which plays exclusively at the ‘macro’ level and which yields an abstract harm, and which should therefore not be placed on an equal footing with the atrocity crimes, rather than as a compound of wrongs against individuals (civilians and combatants alike) that entails ‘the slaughter of human life, the infliction of human suffering, and the erosion of human security’. It is only by picking up the Nuremberg legacy and implementing Article 8bis Rome Statute that the International Criminal Court will bring about a much needed changement d’esprit in this regard.

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118 Consider e.g. the concern expressed in this respect by Norway upon the adoption of the Kampala Resolution, statement reprinted in Barriga & Kreß, supra note 3, p. 813.


120 Ibid.


123 Creegan, supra note 13, p. 59.

124 In this sense, see Dannenbaum, supra note 12 (in particular Section 3.2). For another critique of the ‘Walzerian’ approach, see J. McMahan, Killing in War (2009). On the position of individuals as victims of the crime of aggression, see further: E. Pobjie, ‘Victims of the crime of aggression’, in Kreß & Barriga, supra note 31, pp. 816-859.