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ACCORDANCE WITH INTERNATIONAL LAW OF THE UNILATERAL DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE IN RESPECT OF KOSOVO

IV. THE QUESTION WHETHER THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE IS IN ACCORDANCE WITH INTERNATIONAL LAW

78. The Court now turns to the substance of the request submitted by the General Assembly. The Court recalls that it has been asked by the General Assembly to assess the accordance of the declaration of independence of 17 February 2008 with “international law” (resolution 63/3 of the General Assembly, 8 October 2008). The Court will first turn its attention to certain questions concerning the lawfulness of declarations of independence under general international law, against the background of which the question posed falls to be considered, and Security Council resolution 1244 (1999) is to be understood and applied. Once this general framework has been determined, the Court will turn to the legal relevance of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999), and determine whether the resolution creates special rules, and ensuing obligations, under international law applicable to the issues raised by the present request and having a bearing on the lawfulness of the declaration of independence of 17 February 2008.

A. General international law

79. During the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were numerous instances of declarations of independence, often strenuously opposed by the State from which independence was being declared. Sometimes a declaration resulted in the creation of a new State,

at others it did not. In no case, however, does the practice of States as a whole suggest that the act of promulgating the declaration was regarded as contrary to international law. On the contrary, State practice during this period points clearly to the conclusion that international law contained no prohibition of declarations of independence. During the second half of the twentieth century, the international law of self-determination developed in such a way as to create a right to independence for the peoples of non-self-governing territories and peoples subject to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation (cf. *Legal Consequences for States of the Continued Presence of South Africa in Namibia (South West Africa) notwithstanding Security Council Resolution 276 (1970)*, *Advisory Opinion*, I.C.J. Reports 1971, pp. 31-32, paras. 52-53; *East Timor (Portugal v. Australia)*, *Judgment*, I.C.J. Reports 1995, p. 102, para. 29; *Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory*, *Advisory Opinion*, I.C.J. Reports 2004 (I), pp. 171-172, para. 88). A great many new States have come into existence as a result of the exercise of this right. There were, however, also instances of declarations of independence outside this context. The practice of States in these latter cases does not point to the emergence in international law of a new rule prohibiting the making of a declaration of independence in such cases.

80. Several participants in the proceedings before the Court have contended that a prohibition of unilateral declarations of independence is implicit in the principle of territorial integrity.

The Court recalls that the principle of territorial integrity is an important part of the international legal order and is enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, in particular in Article 2, paragraph 4, which provides that:

“All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.”

In General Assembly resolution 2625 (XXV), entitled “Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation among States in Accordance with the Charter of the United Nations”, which reflects customary international law (*Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States of America)*, *Merits*, *Judgment*, I.C.J. Reports 1986, pp. 101-103, paras. 191-193), the General Assembly reiterated “[t]he principle that States shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State”. This resolution then enumerated various obligations incumbent upon States to refrain from violating the territorial integrity of other sovereign States. In the same vein, the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe of 1 August 1975 (the Helsinki Conference) stipulated that “[t]he participating States will respect the territorial integrity of each of the participating States” (Art. IV). Thus, the scope of the principle of territorial integrity is confined to the sphere of relations between States.

81. Several participants have invoked resolutions of the Security Council condemning particular declarations of independence: see, *inter alia*, Security Council resolutions 216 (1965) and 217 (1965), concerning Southern Rhodesia; Security Council resolution 541 (1983), concerning northern Cyprus; and Security Council resolution 787 (1992), concerning the Republika Srpska.

The Court notes, however, that in all of those instances the Security Council was making a determination as regards the concrete situation existing at the time that those declarations of independence were made; the illegality attached to the declarations of independence thus stemmed not from the unilateral character of these declarations as such, but from the fact that they were, or would have been, connected with the unlawful use of force or other egregious violations of norms of general international law, in particular those of a peremptory character (*jus cogens*). In the context of Kosovo, the Security Council has never taken this position. The exceptional character of the resolutions enumerated above appears to the Court to confirm that no general prohibition against unilateral declarations of independence may be inferred from the practice of the Security Council.

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82. A number of participants in the present proceedings have claimed, although in almost every instance only as a secondary argument, that the population of Kosovo has the right to create an independent State either as a manifestation of a right to self-determination or pursuant to what they described as a right of “remedial secession” in the face of the situation in Kosovo.

The Court has already noted (see paragraph 79 above) that one of the major developments of international law during the second half of the twentieth century has been the evolution of the right of self-determination. Whether, outside the context of non-self-governing territories and peoples subject to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation, the international law of self-determination confers upon part of the population of an existing State a right to separate from that State is, however, a subject on which radically different views were expressed by those taking part in the proceedings and expressing a position on the question. Similar differences existed regarding whether international law provides for a right of “remedial secession” and, if so, in what circumstances. There was also a sharp difference of views as to whether the circumstances which some participants maintained would give rise to a right of “remedial secession” were actually present in Kosovo.

83. The Court considers that it is not necessary to resolve these questions in the present case. The General Assembly has requested the Court’s opinion only on whether or not the declaration of independence is in accordance with international law. Debates regarding the extent of the right of self-determination and the existence of any right of “remedial secession”, however, concern the right to separate from a State. As the Court has already noted (see paragraphs 49 to 56 above), and as almost all participants agreed, that issue is beyond the scope of the question posed by the General Assembly. To answer that question, the Court need only determine whether the declaration of independence violated either general international law or the *lex specialis* created by Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

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84. For the reasons already given, the Court considers that general international law contains no applicable prohibition of declarations of independence. Accordingly, it concludes that the declaration of independence of 17 February 2008 did not violate general international law. Having arrived at that conclusion, the Court now turns to the legal relevance of Security Council resolution 1244, adopted on 10 June 1999.