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What Should the *Restatement (Fourth)* Say About Treaty Interpretation?

*Jean Galbraith*

**ABSTRACT**

The Restatement (Second) and Restatement (Third) of the Foreign Relations Law took notably different approaches to treaty interpretation, reflecting intervening changes in the legal landscape. This symposium contribution identifies five developments in international and domestic law since the Restatement (Third). It then considers their import for the forthcoming Restatement (Fourth). Most importantly, it argues that the Restatement (Fourth) should fully incorporate two articles on treaty interpretation from the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties into its black-letter provisions. Since the time of the Restatement (Third), these articles have become central to international practice on treaty interpretation, and the principles they set forth are broadly consistent with how the U.S. Supreme Court approaches treaty interpretation. This contribution also suggests that the Restatement (Fourth) soften the Restatement (Third)'s provisions on deference to the executive branch in treaty interpretation. Finally, this contribution notes the rising importance in foreign relations law of the interpretation of legislation related to treaty implementation.

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* Assistant Professor, University of Pennsylvania Law School. For their helpful comments, I thank the participants at the BYU Law Review symposium on Treaty Law and the Restatement. I also thank Zach Smith and other editors of the BYU Law Review. A full draft of this Article was written (and made publicly available) before the reporters of the Restatement (Fourth) circulated their draft provision on treaty interpretation.
At the end of the drafting of the Restatement (Third) of the Foreign Relations Law, one observer joked that the Restatements should be titled like serial westerns—“something like Restatement, Return of the Restatement, Son of the Restatement, and the Restatement Rides Again.”¹ As with all good analogies between law and popular culture, this quip is ridiculous and yet somehow right. To be sure, there is little of the lone rider in a Restatement. Instead, each Restatement is the product of a byzantine institutional process involving reporters, counselors, advisers, the ALI Council, and the ALI membership, as the immense number of drafts will attest. But the quip has a ring of truth. There is something undeniably heroic about the Restatements. They tower over most other private contributions to the understanding and the development of law.

With the Restatement (Fourth) of the Foreign Relations Law now on horse—though still far from the sunset—comes the scramble to influence its course. Like others, I have a wish list. Mine includes as narrow treatment as possible of some recent Supreme Court decisions relating to treaties and an emphasis on process-based flexibility for the political branches.² For purposes of this symposium, however, I wish to focus on a single issue: the legal principles that should govern the interpretation of treaties by U.S. courts.

Two core questions underlie treaty interpretation by U.S. courts. First, what legal principles govern the interpretation of treaties? Second, to what actors, if any, should deference be given with regard to treaty interpretation? Each of these questions potentially has both international and domestic legal dimensions. The Restatement (Second) and Restatement (Third) both addressed these questions,

¹. The Restatement of Foreign Relations Law of the United States, Revised: How Were the Controversies Resolved?, 81 AM. SOC’Y INT’L L. PROC. 180, 181 (1987) (remarks of Professor Harold G. Maier). I have reluctantly decided not to adopt this naming convention. Instead, I follow the American Law Institute in referring to the 1965 Restatement of the Foreign Relations Law as Restatement (Second) and to the 1987 Restatement of the Foreign Relations Law as Restatement (Third)—a naming schema used despite the fact that there was never a Restatement (First) of the Foreign Relations Law.

². See Jean Galbraith, Congress’s Treaty-Implementing Power in Historical Practice, 56 WM. & MARY L. REV. 59 (2014) (demonstrating that long-standing historical practice supports a congressional power under the Necessary and Proper Clause to implement treaties); Jean Galbraith, Prospective Advice and Consent, 37 YALE J. INT’L L. 247 (2012) (arguing that under certain conditions the Senate has the constitutional power to advise and consent to treaties before they are finalized).
What Should the Restatement (Fourth) Say?

but, as I detail here, they did so against quite different backdrops than are present today. Since the Restatement (Third) was finalized in the mid-1980s, there have been shifts both in international law on treaty interpretation and in U.S. domestic practice regarding treaty interpretation. The Restatement (Fourth) should ideally structure its provisions on treaty interpretation not only to reflect these developments, but also to situate them analytically in ways that further the “clarification and simplification of the law and its better adaptation to social needs.” I argue here that the most important way to do so would be to incorporate the full text of Articles 31 and 32 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (“Vienna Convention”) into the black letter of Restatement (Fourth). In addition, I offer some thoughts on how the Restatement (Fourth) should approach the issues of deference and of the interpretation of statutes related to the implementation of treaties.

I. HOW THE RESTATEMENTS (SECOND) AND (THIRD) DEALT WITH TREATY INTERPRETATION

This Part describes the choices about treaty interpretation made in the Restatement (Second) and Restatement (Third) and sets them in the context of the times in which these Restatements were drafted. Doing so sets the stage for considering the prospects for change and continuity in the future Restatement (Fourth).

A. Restatement (Second)

The original plan of study for the Restatement (Second) did not include treaty interpretation among its topics. It was quickly added, but mainly because of an interest in the domestic legal question of whether U.S. courts owed deference to the views of the executive branch on treaty questions. Throughout this piece, I focus on U.S. courts as the interpretive actors, but some of the analysis could also apply to executive branch actors engaged in treaty making.

3. Certificate of Incorporation of the American Law Institute (Feb. 23, 1923), https://www.ali.org/media/filer_public/10/62/106284da-ddfe-4ff4-a698-0a47f268ce4c/certificate-of-incorporation.pdf. Throughout this piece, I focus on U.S. courts as the interpretive actors, but some of the analysis could also apply to executive branch actors engaged in treaty making.

4. Am. Law Inst., Agenda for Discussion of Possible Work on Project in the Field of Foreign Relations Law 5–5 (Mar. 1955) (describing four sub-issues for the planned treaty section, none of which was interpretation). All primary sources cited from the drafting of the Restatements, including this document, are available on Hein’s ALI database.
branch. By contrast, Reporter Adrian Fisher initially considered the international law on treaty interpretation to be a topic on which the Restatement would not add particular value. As the project developed, however, it came to encompass both international and domestic legal considerations in relation to treaty interpretation.

As to the international legal principles of treaty interpretation, Section 147(1) of the Restatement (Second) identified the overall aim to be “ascertain[ing] and giv[ing] effect to the purpose of the international agreement.” It produced a list of nine factors “to be taken [into] account by way of guidance” in doing so. The first factor was “the ordinary meaning of the words of the agreement in the context in which they are used,” while the remaining eight factors included the shared negotiating history, subsequent practice, and other textual and background considerations. Section 147(2) then provided that while the first factor “must always be considered as a factor in the interpretation of [an] agreement,” there was “no established priority as between the [other factors] . . . or as between them and additional factors not listed therein.”

The Restatement (Second) identified two additional domestic-law factors that U.S. courts interpreting a treaty should use “for the purpose of determining its effect as domestic law.” The first was relevant evidence from the U.S. negotiators and from the advice-and-consent process, regardless of whether this material was communicated to other parties to the treaty. The second factor was the giving of “weight”—in fact “great weight”—to an interpretation asserted by the executive branch “in the conduct of [U.S.] foreign

6. Am. Law Inst., Transcript of Conference on Possible Project in Foreign Relations Law 20 (Mar. 31, 1955) (explaining that while some international legal issues, such as reservations, were the “part of the wheel that seems to . . . be squeaking” and thus deserved treatment, treaty interpretation seemed straightforward and its coverage would be “awfully black-letter-ish”).
8. Id.
9. Id.
10. Id. § 147(2).
11. Id. § 151.
12. Id. § 151(a) & cmt. b.
relations.” Commentary in a preliminary draft asked “[h]ow [m]uch [w]eight [d]oes ‘[g]reat [w]eight’ [h]ave?” and observed bluntly that “[t]horough-going realists might say that in actuality the ‘great weight’ rule is merely a symbol of professional courtesy between coordinate branches of government, or that it is a rationalization of conclusions reached on other grounds.” The final commentary was not so explicit, but it did remark that “the relative importance of the weight to be accorded to the views of the executive branch and the factors indicated in § 147 cannot be precisely stated.”

Several things are notable about the approach adopted by the Restatement (Second). First, overall there is a strong preference for flexibility over predictability in treaty interpretation. The invocation of nine factors in Section 147 is the most obvious expression of this preference, but it can also be found in the comment suggesting the variable meaning of “great weight.” Second, the only institutional deference identified—the deference due to the positions of the executive branch—is to a domestic actor. The Restatement (Second) is mostly silent about the prospect of deference to foreign or international courts. As to foreign courts, the commentary effectively treats their interpretations as an uninteresting species of state practice, viewing their decisions as “no more conclusive internationally than any other unilateral national interpretation such as one by a foreign office or chief of state.” As to international courts, the Restatement (Second) notes that their interpretations can bind internationally for a state that has previously consented to their jurisdiction, but does not suggest deference in other circumstances.

Third, the Restatement (Second) treats evidence of the U.S. intent in forming the treaty and deference to the executive branch’s interpretation as important for U.S. courts engaged in treaty interpretation because of treaties’ status as domestic law. By conceptually separating the treaty’s status as international law from

13. Id. §§ 149, 151(b), 152.
16. Id. § 148 cmt. b.
17. Id. § 148(1).
the treaty’s status as domestic law, the Restatement (Second) thus justifies parochial moves that can further U.S. functional and institutional values. But in the process it creates the odd potential of a treaty provision having one meaning under international law and a different meaning under domestic law. In the commentary, the authors of the Restatement (Second) signal consciousness about the awkwardness of their solution by noting that, in practice, courts and agencies try to “avoid differences between the international and the internal legal effects of international agreements.”

The Restatement (Second) was published in 1965. Just four years later, the Vienna Convention was finalized. During its negotiations, the United States pushed hard for highly flexible clauses on treaty interpretation, but the Vienna Convention ultimately adopted a somewhat more focused approach. Article 31(1) of the Vienna Convention provides that a treaty “shall be interpreted in good faith in accordance with the ordinary meaning to be given to the terms of the treaty in their context and in light of its object and purpose.” Among other additional provisions, it also states that there “shall be taken into account . . . any subsequent agreement between the parties regarding the interpretation of the treaty [and] any subsequent practice in the application of the treaty which establishes the agreement of the parties regarding its interpretation.” Article 32 provides that “[r]ecourse may be had to supplementary means of interpretation, including the preparatory work of the treaty and the circumstances of its conclusion, in order to confirm the meaning resulting from the application of Article 31, or to determine the meaning where the interpretation according to Article 31” is ambiguous or manifestly absurd. Taken together, Articles 31 and 32 cover much of the same ground as Section 147 of the Restatement (Second), but they are not as free form. Among other

18. Id. § 151 cmt. a.
22. Id. Another provision of Article 31 notes that “[a]ny relevant rules of international law applicable in the relations between the parties” should also be considered. Id.
23. Id.
What Should the Restatement (Fourth) Say?

differences, they place a stronger emphasis on the treaty’s text and a lesser weight on the negotiating history.

The United States signed the Vienna Convention in 1970. Because of a disagreement between the president and the Senate about an issue unrelated to Articles 31 and 32, the United States did not ratify the treaty in the years that followed its signature. To this day, the treaty remains formally pending in the Senate’s advice and consent process.

B. Restatement (Third)

The authors of the Restatement (Third) wrote their sections on treaty interpretation against the backdrop of both the Restatement (Second) and the Vienna Convention. One major choice for them, therefore, was what to do when the two differed. Which should they follow?

The first tentative draft forthrightly sided with the Vienna Convention over Section 147 of the Restatement (Second) in its proposed black-letter language. These proposed sections tracked Vienna Convention Articles 31 and 32 word-for-word, except for substituting the term “international agreement” for “treaty.” The draft commentary and reporters’ notes stated that the Vienna Convention’s provisions were “somewhat different from the approach ordinarily taken by courts in the United States” in that the Vienna Convention placed more emphasis on text, and less on purpose and on the drafting history. This draft also concluded that Articles 31 and 32 of the Vienna Convention were too specific to embody customary international law and observed that therefore, since the United States had not ratified the Vienna Convention, these articles “do not strictly govern interpretation by the United States or by courts in the United States.”

27. Id. § 329 cmt. b.
28. Id. § 329 cmt. a.
nonetheless decided to throw its lot in with the Vienna Convention in describing the international legal principles, while retaining additional sections on principles relevant for U.S. courts as they interpret treaties as domestic law.29

By contrast, the final draft opted for muddy waters. The black-letter provision on interpretation under international law—Section 325—offered only a partial endorsement of Vienna Convention Article 31. It followed Article 31 in noting that interpretation should be “in good faith in accordance with the ordinary meaning to be given to [an international agreement’s] terms in their context and in the light of its object and purpose.”30 It then had a provision on subsequent agreement and subsequent practice, but this provision differed from Article 31 by indicating that subsequent practice was relevant even if this practice did not establish the agreement of the parties.31 The black-letter provision did not include other parts of Article 31 and made no reference to Article 32.

The comments and reporters’ notes revealed that fierce debates lay beneath this black-letter brevity. Like the tentative draft, a comment in the final draft concluded that the Vienna Convention’s specific rules on treaty interpretation did not embody customary international law and therefore did not currently bind U.S. courts.32 The remaining comments and reporters’ notes then emphasized ways in which U.S. practice differed from the Vienna Convention’s approach.33 These included that U.S. courts placed greater emphasis on the negotiating history, that U.S. courts were more purposive in

29. See id. §§ 334–335.
31. Id. § 325(2); see also id. § 325 cmt. c.
32. Id. § 325 cmt. a.
33. The comments also observed that different interpretive approaches might be appropriate for different types of treaties. Articles 31 and 32 do not say anything about this explicitly but commentators have since read them to be compatible with this position. See, e.g., Catherine Brolmann, Specialized Rules of Treaty Interpretation: International Organizations, in THE OXFORD GUIDE TO TREATIES 507, 508–09 (Duncan B. Hollis ed., 2012); Richard Gardiner, The Vienna Convention Rules on Treaty Interpretation, in THE OXFORD GUIDE TO TREATIES, supra, at 475, 504; Mark E. Villiger, The Rules on Interpretation: Mistrigings, Misunderstandings, Miscarriage? The ‘Crucible’ Intended by the International Law Commission, in THE LAW OF TREATIES BEYOND THE VIENNA CONVENTION 105, 122 (Enzo Cannizzaro ed., 2011).
What Should the Restatement (Fourth) Say?

approach, and that overall U.S. courts were “generally more willing than those of other states to look outside the instrument to determine its meaning.” In other words, the comments and notes reiterated many of the positions taken by the United States during the negotiation of the Vienna Convention. Taken all together, the end result is one of studied ambiguity: one can find support in Section 325 either for following the Vienna Convention or for continuing the more free-form approach endorsed by the Restatement (Second).

The Restatement (Third) mostly followed the Restatement (Second) in concluding that U.S. courts should take into account U.S. negotiating records and materials from the advice-and-consent process and that U.S. courts should give “great weight” to executive branch interpretations. But there are some differences between the Restatement (Second) and its successor. For example, the obligation to take U.S. materials into special account was moved out of the black-letter provisions, the “great weight” accorded to the president is suggested to be strongest where the president’s interpretation is made in communication with other countries, and the linkage between these interpretive positions is tied not to a treaty’s status as “domestic law” but rather to its status as “law in the United States.” But it is hard to tell if these differences were meant to be meaningful substantive changes. The Restatement (Third) also followed the Restatement (Second) in saying nothing particular about deference to interpretive decisions by foreign courts, save for a line in the reporters’ notes that “the interpretation of the agreement by other nations, or by international tribunals in cases to which the United States is not a party, will be given due weight.”

34. Restatement (Third) of the Foreign Relations Law of the United States § 325 cmt. g (Am. Law Inst. 1987); see also id. § 323 cmt. e & nn.1 & 4. One can debate how accurately these assertions reflected U.S. case law at the time, but I do not undertake that inquiry here.


36. Restatement (Third) of the Foreign Relations Law of the United States § 326(2) & cmt. a (Am. Law Inst. 1987); see also id. § 325 reporters’ note 5.

37. See generally id. §§ 325–326.

38. Id. § 325 reporters’ note 4 (adding that “such ‘foreign’ interpretations ordinarily are not binding on the United States as a matter of international law and are therefore not
II. CHANGES SINCE THE RESTATEMENT (THIRD)

Both the international and the domestic legal landscapes on treaty interpretation have changed in important ways since the Restatement (Third). This Part briefly describes five changes that I see as important for purposes of evaluating what the Restatement (Fourth) should say on treaty interpretation. I focus on describing the changes that have developed rather than on assessing their normative desirability.

First, Articles 31 and 32 of the Vienna Convention are now accepted as customary international law, even as the status of customary international law as part of the law of the United States has become more controversial. As noted, the Restatement (Third) did not consider Articles 31 and 32 of the Vienna Convention to embody customary international law. Today, however, there is a strong consensus that Articles 31 and 32 do stand for customary international law on treaty interpretation. Indeed, the United States takes this position in litigation before the International Court of Justice. Accordingly, it seems safe to treat Articles 31 and 32 as applicable to the United States as a matter of customary international law.

Yet in the years since the Restatement (Third), the status of customary international law as federal law in the United States has become more controversial. Scholars have taken a range of positions on the issue and, at present, there is no clear consensus.
Fortunately, this overall lack of clarity is mitigated on the particular issue of treaty interpretation. Regardless of the extent to which customary international law is part of federal law, there are good reasons for federal courts to draw on shared international principles in treaty interpretation. As the Supreme Court observed in a recent case, “[i]t is our responsibility to read the treaty in a manner consistent with the shared expectations of the contracting parties.”

Using the accepted international rules on treaty interpretation would further the dispatch of this responsibility. In addition, given the executive branch’s acceptance of Vienna Convention provisions like Articles 31 and 32 as customary international law, “[p]erhaps not surprisingly, therefore, courts sometimes invoke the [customary international law] of [treaties] as embodied in the Vienna Convention.”

Second, Articles 31 and 32 of the Vienna Convention have proved more malleable in international legal practice than their language might suggest. The final draft of the Restatement (Third) was published in 1987, eighteen years after the drafting of the Vienna Convention and only seven years after it entered into force. Since that time, Articles 31 and 32 have mellowed with age. As Richard Gardiner has put it, practice “reveal[s] a quite loose structure for developing interpretations, rather than a straightjacket or formulaic set of requirements.”

This flexibility is also emphasized in the work of international bodies and individual scholars. As one example, the International Law Commission’s current project on Treaties Over Time defines subsequent practice as meaningful under the Vienna

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42. Lozano v. Montoya Alvarez, 134 S. Ct. 1224, 1233 (2014) (emphasis, citation, and internal quotation marks omitted).


44. Gardiner, supra note 33, at 492.
Convention’s rules on interpretation even when this practice falls short of clear agreement. As another example, Julian Mortenson has argued that the Vienna Convention is in fact fairly generous in the extent to which it allows the drafting history to be used. The authors of the Restatement, however, read the Vienna Convention narrowly on each of these issues and accordingly resisted its authority. Now that there is more support for reading Articles 31 and 32 broadly, concerns about their constraints should be reduced.

Third, U.S. courts now approach treaty interpretation in ways that seem compatible with Articles 31 and 32. The last thirty years have also brought developments in treaty interpretation in U.S. courts. For better or worse, there has been a turn towards textualism in U.S. statutory interpretation, eroding what the reporters of the Restatement (Third) viewed as “the strong tendency in United States case law to reject literal-minded interpretation of statutes.” This same turn has manifested itself in treaty interpretation. A 1988 Supreme Court decision explained that “[w]hen interpreting a treaty, we begin with the text of the treaty and the context in which the written words are used.” The Court immediately qualified this

45. The International Law Commission’s current draft conclusions do this in two ways. First, they do so in relation to Article 31(3), which speaks of “[a]ny subsequent practice in the application of the treaty which establishes the agreement of the parties regarding its interpretation.” Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, supra note 19, at 340. The draft conclusions make clear that such agreement can be satisfied by active engagement by a varying number of parties combined with “[s]ilence on the part of one or more parties . . . when the circumstances call for some reaction.” Int’l Law Comm’n, Subsequent Agreements and Subsequent Practice in Relation to the Interpretation of Treaties, U.N. Doc. A/CN.4/L.833, at Draft Conclusion 9 (2014), http://legal.un.org/docs/?symbol=A/CN.4/L.833. Second, the draft conclusions find that subsequent practice by a single party is a supplementary means of interpretation for purposes of Article 32. Int’l Law Comm’n, Subsequent Agreements and Subsequent Practice in Relation to the Interpretation of Treaties, U.N. Doc. A/CN.4/L.813, at Draft Conclusion 1(4) (2013), http://legal.un.org/docs/?symbol=A/CN.4/L.813 (“Recourse may be had to other subsequent practice in the application of the treaty as a supplementary means of interpretation under article 32.”); id. at Draft Conclusion 4(3) (observing that “[o]ther subsequent practice” can be the conduct of “one or more parties” to the treaty).

46. See generally Mortenson, supra note 20.

47. RESTATEMENT (THIRD) OF THE FOREIGN RELATIONS LAW OF THE UNITED STATES § 325 cmts. c, g, & reporters’ note 4.

48. Id. § 325 reporters’ note 4.

What Should the Restatement (Fourth) Say?

remark, however, by noting that “[o]ther general rules of construction may be brought to bear on difficult or ambiguous passages” and “[t]reaties are construed more liberally than private agreements, and to ascertain their meaning we may look beyond the written words to the history of the treaty, the negotiations, and the practical construction adopted by the parties.”\(^5\) More recently, in *Abbott v. Abbott*, the Supreme Court simply stated that “[t]he interpretation of a treaty, like the interpretation of a statute, begins with its text.”\(^5\) It is hard to tell how much this proclaimed emphasis on text affects the actual interpretive process engaged in by the Court. *Abbott* itself drew upon many interpretive principles besides text, including subsequent practice, evidence from the negotiations, and the “objects and purposes” of the treaty.\(^5\) And another more recent case, *Bond v. United States*, downplayed text in favor of the perceived purpose of the treaty at issue.\(^5\)

The overall picture is essentially one of convergence between Articles 31 and 32 as interpreted over time and the Supreme Court’s approach to treaty interpretation. Both emphasize text but make room for many other interpretive principles as well. As one scholar puts it, “at one time or another the Court has used every single interpretive tool reflected in the Vienna Rules” and indeed “consistently relies on the same interpretive tools.”\(^5\) This similarity is likely one rooted in the common imperatives of engaging in

\(^{50}\). Volkswagenwerk Aktiengesellschaft, 486 U.S. at 700 (internal quotation marks omitted).

\(^{51}\). 560 U.S. 1, 9 (2010) (internal quotation marks omitted); see also *Medellín v. Texas*, 552 U.S. 491, 506–07 (2008) (using this same language but also noting that “we have also considered as aids to its interpretation the negotiation and drafting history of the treaty as well as the postratification understanding of signatory nations”) (internal quotation marks omitted).

\(^{52}\). 560 U.S. at 18–20 (not stating, however, how much weight it was giving the evidence from the negotiating history, perhaps because of doubts about how objectively this evidence reflected the negotiating history); see also infra note 63 and accompanying text (noting *Abbott*’s use of deference to the executive branch).

\(^{53}\). 134 S. Ct. 2077, 2087 (2014) (discussing the interpretation of the treaty in the course of interpreting its implementing legislation, stating that despite “its broadly worded definitions, we have doubts that a treaty about chemical weapons has anything to do with” an individual assault that used chemicals and adding that there “is no reason to think the sovereign nations that ratified the Convention were interested in anything like” such individual assaults).

\(^{54}\). Roger P. Alford, Bond and the Vienna Rules, 90 Notre Dame L. Rev. 1561, 1561 (2015); see also id. at 1566–70.
interpretation rather than in direct causal ties. The Supreme Court has paid little formal attention to Articles 31 and 32—or, for that matter, to either Restatement with regard to treaty interpretation. To date, no Supreme Court majority opinion has cited the Vienna Convention Articles 31 or 32, and only two dissenting opinions have done so.55 One Supreme Court majority opinion does cite Section 325 of the Restatement (Third) for the proposition that “[a]n international agreement is to be interpreted in good faith in accordance with the ordinary meaning to be given to its terms in their context and in the light of its object and purpose.”56 The Court does not mention that this language is modeled off Article 31, but the use of this language demonstrates that the Court is indeed comfortable with the rule articulated in Article 31(1) of the Vienna Convention. This is consistent with the broader point that while the Supreme Court shows no specific attachment to the Vienna Convention’s provisions on treaty interpretation, it also shows no particular hostility toward them. Instead, the Court mostly just quotes its own precedent on the standards of interpretation which, as mentioned, seems within the big tent of Articles 31 and 32.

Although the general principles of treaty interpretation have converged, there remains the issue of how U.S. courts should deal with what the Restatement (Second) identified as domestic-law factors: first, deference to the executive branch and second, the

55. Abbott, 560 U.S. at 40 n.11 (2010) (Stevens, Thomas & Breyer, JJ., dissenting) (citing Article 32 of the Vienna Convention in arguing that the focus should have been on the plain language); Sale v. Haitian Ctrs. Council, Inc., 509 U.S. 155, 191, 194 (1993) (Blackmun, J., dissenting) (citing Articles 31 and 32 in chiding the majority for over-emphasizing dubious evidence from the negotiating history at the expense of the ordinary meaning of the text). Some lower court opinions do cite to Articles 31 and 32 of the Vienna Convention. See Criddle, supra note 39, at 447 n.72 (giving examples).

56. Sanchez-Llamas v. Oregon, 548 U.S. 331, 346 (2006). In addition, one majority opinion of the Court has cited to Section 147 of the Restatement (Second). Trans World Airlines v. Franklin Mint Corp., 466 U.S. 243, 259 (1984) (citing in passing to the Restatement (Second)’s inclusion of subsequent practice as a factor in treaty interpretation). As best I can tell, Restatement provisions on treaty interpretations have been cited in only one other case—in a concurring opinion by Justice Scalia. In this opinion, he attacks the position taken in both the Restatement (Second) and the Restatement (Third) that U.S. courts can draw on materials from the Senate advice and consent process in interpreting treaties, at least where the text appears plain. United States v. Stuart, 489 U.S. 353, 371–76 (1989) (Scalia, J., concurring) (stating that this approach “commits the United States to a form of interpretation plainly out of step with international practice”).
What Should the Restatement (Fourth) Say?

added importance of U.S. intent in forming the treaty as shown by
U.S. negotiating documents and evidence from the advice-and-
consent process. I address the first point as a separate issue below.57
As for the second point, my impression is that this issue has not
proved particularly important in practice, at least outside the context
of treaty self-execution, which I discuss as a separate issue below.58
This may be because in practice evidence specific to internal U.S.
processes may rarely end up shedding light on contested issues of
treaty interpretation before U.S. courts. In United States v. Stuart,
for example, the Court did discuss this evidence but only for the
purpose of observing that it shed no light on the specific issue in the
case.59 The importance of this issue may be further diminished
because, as discussed below,60 the domestic law that courts are directly
applying is often treaty-implementing legislation rather than treaties.

Fourth, the picture with respect to deference reflects some modest
changes since the Restatement (Third). Current doctrine with respect
to deference to the executive branch is hard to characterize with
confidence. In an important survey of the issue, Robert Chesney
suggests that “the high-water mark for the deference doctrine in its
formal aspect” came with the Supreme Court’s 1982 decision in
Sumitomo Shoji America, Inc v. Avagliano61—a few years before the
Restatement (Third) was completed. Yet the Supreme Court and
lower courts do frequently continue to invoke the principle of
deerence and, when they do so, they usually interpret the treaty in
line with the executive branch’s position (although it is hard to know
how causal the executive branch position is to the outcome).62 In
Abbott v. Abbott, for example, the Court invoked the “great weight”
doctrine over the dissenting view of Justices Stevens, Thomas, and

57. See infra Section III.B.
58. See infra Section III.C.
59. 489 U.S. at 366–67. As noted supra note 56, Justice Scalia objected to this
interpretive consideration.
60. See infra Section III.C.
61. Robert M. Chesney, Disaggregating Deference: The Judicial Power and Executive
62. See id. at 1754–58 (reviewing published federal court decisions from 1984 to 2007
that invoke the concept of deference and finding that the executive branch position usually
prevails in these cases, but noting that he only reviewed cases “in which the courts engaged,
more or less directly, the deference doctrine”).
Breyer that the doctrine was inappropriate where the executive branch had “no unique vantage” on the issue. But in *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld* the Supreme Court declined to even mention the “great weight” standard as it ruled against the executive branch on a point of treaty interpretation, even as Justice Thomas chided it in a dissent joined by Justice Scalia for not “acknowledging its duty to defer to the President.” More recently, in *BG Group PLC v. Republic of Argentina*, the Court simply said that “we respect the Government’s views about the proper interpretation of treaties” and then disregarded those views. In short, although the “great weight” standard continues to be frequently invoked, one cannot confidently predict that a court will in fact give great weight to the views of the executive branch on treaty interpretation.

Besides deference to the executive branch, the Supreme Court sometimes notes deference to treaty interpretations by foreign courts. As mentioned earlier, both the *Restatement (Second)* and the *Restatement (Third)* appear to view foreign court decisions as relevant only as state subsequent practice (unless they are directly binding decisions by international tribunals). The Supreme Court has indeed embraced foreign court decisions as evidence of state practice. In *Abbott v. Abbott*, the Court observed that in “interpreting any treaty, the opinions of our sister signatories are entitled to considerable weight” and then went on at some length to discuss court decisions in other jurisdictions. Something notable about *Abbott*—and about other cases in which the Court has looked to the practice of other states—is how much the Court focuses on the decisions of individual foreign courts as distinct from statements

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63. 560 U.S. 1, 15 (2010); see also id. at 41–43 (Stevens, Thomas & Breyer, JJ., dissenting).
64. See *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*, 548 U.S. 557, 619–32 (2006); see also id. at 718–19 (Thomas, J., dissenting).
67. *Abbott*, 560 U.S. at 16 (internal quotation marks omitted) (using this broad language even though, in addition, the accompanying statute emphasized the importance of uniformity in interpretation).
68. Id. at 16–18.
or positions taken by individual legislative or executive branches. At the least, foreign court decisions appear to be the favored markers of state practice for the Supreme Court; at the most, one could say that there seems to be a level of deference that at least sometimes transcends the category of state practice. In addition, the Supreme Court has expressed a willingness, albeit a distinctly lukewarm one, to give “respectful consideration to the interpretation of an international treaty rendered by an international court with jurisdiction to interpret such.” Taken all together, the Court seems to place special emphasis on the appropriateness of looking to foreign court decisions in treaty interpretation.

Finally, U.S. practice on treaty implementation has developed in ways that are relevant to treaty interpretation. Since the time of the Restatement (Third), issues involving treaty implementation in the United States have received considerable attention. Two issues in particular relate to treaty interpretation.

One issue has to do with whether or not a treaty is self-executing. According to Medellín v. Texas, whether a treaty is self-executing in the United States is primarily a matter of treaty interpretation. Yet there is an important disconnect between this

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69. Id.; Lozano v. Montoya Alvarez, 134 S. Ct. 1224, 1233 (2014) (noting foreign court decisions in interpreting the Hague Convention on Civil Aspects of Child Abduction, although without expressly discussing the level of weight given to them); El Al Israel Airlines, Ltd. v. Tsui Yuan Tseng, 525 U.S. 155, 173–76 & n.16 (1999) (heavily emphasizing a decision from the highest court of England and Wales under the Warsaw Convention and noting other foreign cases as well); E. Airlines, Inc. v. Floyd, 499 U.S. 530, 550–51 (1991) (giving weight to an Israeli Supreme Court decision regarding the Warsaw Convention but concluding that this weight was outweighed by factors favoring a different interpretation); see also Lozano, 134 S. Ct. at 1238–39 (Alito, J., concurring) (stating that not only is the executive branch’s position “entitled to great weight,” but “[s]o, too, is the interpretation of the courts of our sister signatories” and discussing several foreign decisions); Olympic Airways v. Husain, 540 U.S. 644, 658 (2004) (Scalia, J., dissenting) (arguing that the Court should have interpreted the Warsaw Convention differently in light of appellate court decisions in two of the many signatories to the Warsaw Convention).

70. Breard v. Green, 523 U.S. 371, 375 (1998) (per curiam). Compare Sanchez-Llamas v. Oregon, 548 U.S. 331, 334 (2006) (reiterating this standard but noting that it “cannot overcome the plain import” of the treaty provision at issue), with id. at 382–90 (Breyer, J., dissenting) (arguing that the majority was far too stingy in how it applied “respectful consideration”).

71. 552 U.S. 491, 506–07 (2008). But see id. at 541 (Breyer, J., dissenting) (arguing that prior Supreme Court precedent on self-execution is more important than a treaty’s particular text on this issue).
matter of treaty interpretation and most matters of treaty interpretation. Unlike typical treaty interpretation, the question of self-execution or non-self-execution is ultimately a matter only of U.S. domestic law, not also of international law. Although *Medellín* describes principles of treaty interpretation using language from prior cases engaged in typical treaty interpretation, the Court approaches the issue of whether the relevant article of the U.N. Charter is self-executing in ways that show the distinctness of this issue. Most notably, it emphasizes background principles of foreign relations law and how, in its view, these would have affected the way the Senate perceived the treaty in giving its advice and consent. In practice then, as well as conceptually, the issue of self-execution is not on all fours with typical treaty interpretation.

The other issue has to do with the increased prominence of statutes related to the implementation of treaties. John Coyle has coined the phrase “incorporative statutes” to describe statutes that implement non-self-executing treaties, facilitate the implementation of self-executing treaties, or approve and implement congressional-executive agreements. These kinds of statutes have long existed, but in recent years they have increasingly become the focus of specific consideration by the Supreme Court. In the last few years, for example, the Court decided *Abbott v. Abbott* and *Lozano v. Montoya Alvarez*, interpreting the Hague Convention on Civil Aspects of Child Abduction in conjunction with its facilitating

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73. 552 U.S. at 506–07. In addition, *Medellín* discusses the practices of other nations, although it does not explain precisely why this practice sheds light on what is ultimately an issue of U.S. domestic law.
74. E.g., id. at 508, 510–11; see also id. at 515–16.
76. See Galbraith, supra note 2, at 89–104 (noting some early examples).
77. See Coyle, supra note 75, at 681–85, 692–94 (discussing the Supreme Court’s treatment of incorporative statutes in some cases in the 1980s and 1990s).
78. 560 U.S. 1 (2010).
What Should the Restatement (Fourth) Say?

legislation,80 and Bond v. United States,81 interpreting the legislation implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention. In these cases, the Court offers some signals on the interpretation of incorporative statutes, although these signals do not all line up perfectly with each other.

Consistent with earlier Supreme Court practice,82 Abbott, Lozano, and Bond all suggest that the meaning of the underlying treaties is important for the interpretation of the incorporative statutes. For Abbott and Lozano, this follows obviously from the text of the facilitating statute.83 Bond is more equivocal on this issue, and at one point the Court says, “[W]e have no need to interpret the scope of the Convention in this case.”84 Yet actions speak louder than words, for the Court spends a great deal of effort in describing and interpreting the Chemical Weapons Convention itself.85 As the Court puts it, the legislation “exists to implement the Convention, [and] so we begin with that international agreement.”86 In all three decisions, therefore, the interpretation of the underlying treaty is important.87

80. In addition, the Court decided Chafin v. Chafin, 133 S. Ct. 1017 (2013), but that case is less significant than the other two with regard to treaty interpretation. There are differences between Abbott and Lozano in how they understand the relationship between the treaty and the legislation. In Abbott, the Court seems to treat the treaty as operative through the legislation but basically embodied in it, while in Lozano the Court takes care to indicate that the legislation expressly states that it is “in addition to and not in lieu of the provisions of the Convention.” 134 S. Ct. at 1233. These differences are perhaps due to the Court’s heightened sensitivities to these issues in deciding Lozano while Bond was pending.


82. Coyle, supra note 75, at 681–85.

83. See Lozano, 134 S. Ct. at 1229 (noting that the legislation “instructs courts to decide the case in accordance with the Convention”) (citation and internal quotation marks omitted).

84. 134 S. Ct. at 2088.

85. See id. at 2083–85, 2087–88, 2093. The Court not only interprets the Convention as likely not covering the use of chemicals in the individual assault at issue, id. at 2087, but also interprets the Convention to allow implementation to be done through state rather than federal legislation. Id. at 2087, 2093.


87. It would further seem logical for the Court to interpret these underlying treaties in line with its general approach to treaty interpretation. In fact, there is considerable variation between Abbott, Lozano, and Bond in how they approach treaty interpretation and principles of deference. Regarding deference to the executive branch, for example, Abbott uses the “great
These decisions differ, however, in how they reconcile tensions between the underlying treaties and principles of U.S. domestic law. *Abbott* does not seem to implicate such tensions, but both *Lozano* and *Bond* do. In *Lozano*, the Court considered whether equitable tolling applied to the treaty and its facilitating legislation where (1) the United States has a presumption in statutory interpretation in favor of equitable tolling of a statute of limitations but (2) other parties to the treaty lack a similar presumption. The Court emphasized that “[e]ven if a background principle is relevant to the interpretation of federal statutes, it has no proper role in the interpretation of treaties unless that principle is shared by the parties to an agreement among sovereign powers.” The Court accordingly interpreted the treaty not to require equitable tolling. It then went on to effectively hold that the facilitating legislation did not require tolling either. In *Bond*, by contrast, the Court held that “in this curious case” it was appropriate to apply a federalism canon to the interpretation of the implementing statute—even though, depending on the scope of the treaty, this might make the implementing legislation cover less conduct than was covered by the parallel language in the treaty. Notably, the Court made this novel move

88. See 134 S. Ct. at 1232–33.

89. Id. at 1233.

90. See id. The Court framed this discussion in terms of the facilitating statute not “altering our understanding of the treaty itself.” Id. For there to be no equitable tolling, however, the facilitating statute would also need to not provide for it implicitly, despite the background presumption in American law that equitable tolling is available. The Court thus effectively concluded that the facilitating statute did not impliedly allow for tolling. See id. (noting that this statute “does not address the availability of equitable tolling”).

What Should the Restatement (Fourth) Say?

against the backdrop conclusions that the treaty was “agnostic” about whether enforcement was done at the federal or state level and additionally that all U.S. states had laws to cover the conduct at issue.92 Between them, Lozano and Bond demonstrate how tensions can be found even between cases decided in the same term by the Court.

III. THE RESTATEMENT (FOURTH) AND TREATY INTERPRETATION

Now the Restatement rides again—but on different terrain from its predecessors. So what should the Restatement (Fourth) do about treaty interpretation? The most important change I recommend is heavier reliance on Articles 31 and 32. In addition, ideally the Restatement (Fourth) should make some tweaks to the Restatement (Third)’s approach to deference and address the interpretation of implementing legislation.93

A. Articles 31 and 32 as Black Letter

In the last thirty years, Articles 31 and 32 have become a cornerstone of international treaty practice and have been read broadly enough to leave treaty interpreters with considerable discretion. Instead of tracking the Restatement (Third)’s half-hearted endorsement, the Restatement (Fourth) should fully embrace these articles. The full text of Articles 31 and 32 should appear in the black letter of whatever provision replaces Section 325 of the Restatement (Third). Indeed, if it is compatible with the overall editorial choices, the black letter should ideally not only repeat the text of Articles 31 and 32, but explicitly name these articles as the legal framework governing treaty interpretation.

92. Bond, 134 S. Ct. at 2087, 2092.

93. This Article was drafted and circulated before the reporters of the Restatement (Fourth) circulated their draft provision on treaty interpretation. Although I thus will not comment in detail on this provision, I think it is an excellent one. Broadly speaking, the draft provision takes the approach that I advocate here with respect to Articles 31 and 32 of the Vienna Convention. See Restatement (Fourth) of the Foreign Relations Law of the United States: Treaties § 106 (Am. Law Inst., April Discussion Draft 2015) (incorporating almost the entire text of Articles 31 and 32 into the black-letter provision). The draft provision also takes an approach similar to the one that I advocate with respect to deference, providing in the black letter that U.S. courts “will ordinarily give great weight to an interpretation by the executive branch.” Id.; see also infra Section III.B (advocating the use of “will typically give great weight”).
This approach would have considerable benefits. As discussed earlier, the principles of treaty interpretation applied by the Supreme Court are essentially those of the Vienna Convention, particularly since the Convention is taken to be a “quite loose structure . . . rather than a straightjacket.”94 By incorporating Articles 31 and 32, the Restatement (Fourth) would accurately set forth what is not only customary international law on treaty interpretation, but also explicitly recognized by the United States to be so.

Incorporating Articles 31 and 32 would also provide a set of principles that are not only clear and simple, but also better than other options. One such other option might be simply to set forth some language about treaty interpretation used by the Supreme Court. But this would immediately raise the question of which language, as the Court uses different phrases in different cases without signaling that it has a single, carefully thought-out formula. (Indeed, one phrase on treaty interpretation offered by the Court is already the language of Article 31(1), as set forth in the Restatement (Third)).95 Rather than privileging the choice of language made in some particular Supreme Court cases over other cases, the Restatement (Fourth) would do better to use the internationally accepted rules on treaty interpretation.

Setting forth the full text of Articles 31 and 32 is also better than picking and choosing. Regardless of whether it was a good choice at the time for the Restatement (Third) to set forth only part of Article 31, rewrite another part of Article 31, and take up all other issues in an ambivalent set of comments and reporters’ notes, it would be a poor one today. International practice has come to read the rules in Articles 31 and 32 broadly enough that there is no particular need to rewrite them for U.S. courts. For example, the International Law Commission’s developing recognition that subsequent practice of a single state can be a supplementary form of treaty interpretation under Article 32 mostly addresses the concern that the authors of the Restatement (Third) had with how the Vienna Convention approached subsequent practice.96 By giving the rules in full, the Restatement (Fourth) would accurately reflect customary international

94. Gardiner, supra note 33, at 492.
96. See supra notes 31, 45 and accompanying text.
law and also avoid the difficulties of having to determine and justify which aspects of the rules are most important in practice.

Although Articles 31 and 32 are long, their full inclusion makes particular sense because of how important the issue of treaty interpretation is. Unlike many other issues related to treaties, treaty interpretation comes up in almost every case involving a treaty. Articles 31 and 32 accordingly get used by courts far more than most other provisions of the Convention. Of course, to say they get used is not to say that they have a powerful effect in channeling actual treaty interpretation. Indeed, the broadening understanding of their meaning may reflect the fact that the Vienna Convention “governs in part by not governing—or, put more precisely, achieves widespread compliance partly by deliberately declining to prioritize effectiveness.” Yet widespread acceptance of Articles 31 and 32 has the advantage of focusing the attention of interpreters on the act of interpretation rather than on its meta-principles. Their inclusion in the black letter of the Restatement (Fourth) would also be a valuable affirmation of the importance that international legal principles should have to U.S. courts in interpreting international law.

My suggestions for the comments and reporters’ notes follow straightforwardly from my earlier analysis. I think these should (a) note that Articles 31 and 32 as interpreted are expansive enough to cover how U.S. courts approach treaty-making, (b) note that Articles 31 and 32 now reflect customary international law, (c) pragmatically recognize that Articles 31 and 32 set forth the appropriate rules of decision for U.S. courts while leaving vague exactly why this is the case (in order to dodge the broader debate of the role of customary international law in U.S. law), (d) briefly acknowledge that U.S. courts can further take into account specific evidence from the U.S. negotiating process or the advice-and-consent process, (e) note that U.S. courts may pay special attention to foreign courts both as sources of subsequent practice and as actors whose views are worthy

97. For example, my search of federal court decisions on Westlaw between 2009 and 2014 revealed that Articles 31 or 32 are cited in at least eight of the twenty-five cases in which at least one judge references the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties. At least four of these eight cases cite to Article 32.

of respectful consideration, and (f) state that the issue of treaty self-execution is sufficiently distinct from overall treaty interpretation that it is covered elsewhere. A section along these lines would be of great value in clarifying the foreign relations law of treaty interpretation.

B. Difficult Choices on Deference

A much harder question is how the Restatement (Fourth) should characterize the issue of deference by U.S. courts to the executive branch. Should it follow Restatement (Third)’s approach of stating in the black letter that courts “will give great weight” and then qualifying this though discussion of case law in the reporters’ notes? Or should it soften the black letter—for example, “will typically give great weight”—in addition to discussing case law in the reporters’ notes?

I think either of these approaches could effectively describe the Supreme Court’s existing practice. From a descriptive perspective, the important thing is to communicate that the Court usually (but not always) says that it gives “great weight” to the views of the executive branch and yet sometimes decides cases in ways that seem inconsistent with substantial deference. In that sense, we may not be too far off from the frank observation in the Restatement (Second)’s preliminary draft that the “great weight” rule might in actuality be just “a symbol of professional courtesy between coordinate branches of government, or . . . a rationalization of conclusions reached on other grounds.” 99 But this can be expressed either through softening the black letter or through building up the disclaimers that follow later.

Nonetheless, for normative reasons I favor the approach of softening the black letter to something like “will typically give great weight.” I think “will give great weight” implies a duty to defer, while “will typically give great weight” implies a discretionary but generally wise exercise of deference. This difference speaks to a fundamental question of control—about whether courts defer to the executive branch out of a duty to show respect for presidential power in foreign affairs or instead out of a strong presumption that the executive branch has particular judgment and expertise in these matters. Where the interpretation of treaties is concerned—an area

where dubious interpretations by the executive branch could leave the United States in violation of legal obligations owed to other nations—I think it is better to characterize deference as a strong presumption rather than a duty.100

C. The Interpretation of Incorporative Statutes

A final issue is the interpretation of incorporative statutes. Because of the increased attention this issue has gotten in practice, it deserves some treatment in the Restatement (Fourth). It could conceivably be its own section, but because it is a still emerging issue, it seems to me that it would be best treated simply in a comment or in a reporters’ note accompanying the main provision on treaty interpretation.

An incorporative statute should be interpreted in light of the underlying treaty (which itself will thus have to be interpreted). That is both evident from Supreme Court case law and intuitively correct. Less clear is how strong this interpretive canon is—and particularly how strong it is when it conflicts with canons of statutory construction in U.S. domestic law. Professor Coyle suggests that “the court should read the incorporative statute to conform to the” treaty as interpreted, “unless there is compelling evidence that Congress intended a different result.”101 This rule strikes me as eminently sensible and consistent with the implicit approach of Lozano and some earlier Supreme Court cases. But Bond takes a different tack and accepts that U.S. federalism principles could justify a gap between the interpretation of an incorporative statute and its similarly-worded underlying treaty. It remains for future practice to clarify whether Bond is a trendsetter or an outlier. Until then, the best thing for the Restatement (Fourth) to do might be just to state the obvious and note that courts can take different approaches in interpreting incorporative statutes when there is a tension between the interpretation of the treaty under international law and the usual canons of statutory construction under domestic law.

100. For another discussion of this question, see Cohen, supra note 66, at 1487–92.
Reflecting on the drafting of the *Restatement (Third)*, Associate Reporter Detlav Vagts described how the reporters would first meet to “thrash [a draft] out with a certain amount of blood shed on the floor, usually at the Columbia Law School.”102 They would then go to the Advisers and have it be “picked over, carefully and in detail,” then take it to the Council and have to “pick ourselves off the floor after that,” and then take it to the ALI membership where “the floor is somewhat of a bottleneck.”103

Overall, the Restatement drafting process almost rivals the complexity of multilateral treaty negotiations. And in Articles 31 and 32 of the Vienna Convention, we have already the product of an exhaustive multilateral treaty negotiation—a product, moreover, that has clearly weathered the test of time. Given the broad international acceptance of these articles and their compatibility with the practice of treaty interpretation in U.S. courts, their incorporation into the black letter of the *Restatement (Fourth)* would be wise and might even be unusually easy to do. Although less important, a softening of the deference standard set out in the *Restatement (Third)* and some discussion of incorporative statutes would also be valuable. I hope the process will follow this course.


103. *Id.*