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QUANTUM DECRYPTION AND THE DOCTRINE OF NON-INTERVENTION: DOES UNAUTHORIZED DATA ACCESS CONSTITUTE A BREACH OF TERRITORIAL SOVEREIGNTY?

Islombek Abdikhakimov

Head of Artificial Intelligence and Legal Tech Laboratory,
Senior Lectrurer of Law and Technology Department,
Tashkent State University of Law
E-mail: islombekabduhakimov@gmail.com
Orcid: 0000-0002-3682-2810

Abstract. The rapid advancement of quantum computing technologies, specifically the development of Cryptographically Relevant Quantum Computers (CRQCs), poses an unprecedented challenge to the stability of the Westphalian international legal order. Current public-key encryption standards, which secure the vast majority of global state communications, are mathematically vulnerable to Shor's algorithm, enabling a strategic paradigm known as "Harvest Now, Decrypt Later" (HNDL). This article investigates the legal implications of this technological shift, specifically questioning whether the unauthorized retroactive decryption of a state's sensitive data constitutes a breach of territorial sovereignty and a violation of the non-intervention doctrine under customary international law. Through a doctrinal analysis of the UN Charter, the Tallinn Manual 2.0, and International Court of Justice jurisprudence, the research argues that while traditional espionage is permitted, the systemic transparency created by quantum decryption functions as a coercive instrument that usurps a state's "domaine réservé." The study concludes that unauthorized quantum access to critical government infrastructure crosses the threshold from intelligence gathering to prohibited intervention, necessitating a redefinition of digital territoriality.

Keywords*:* Quantum Computing, Territorial Sovereignty, Non-Intervention, Tallinn Manual 2.0, Shor's Algorithm, Cyber Espionage, International Law, Harvest Now Decrypt Later.

Introduction

The architecture of global cybersecurity relies fundamentally on the mathematical difficulty of specific computational problems, primarily integer factorization and discrete logarithms. These mathematical hurdles underpin the RSA (Rivest–Shamir–Adleman) and Elliptic Curve Cryptography (ECC) protocols that currently secure the confidentiality of diplomatic cables, military command-and-control systems, and critical national infrastructure. However, the theoretical framework proposed by Peter Shor in 1994 demonstrated that a quantum computer of sufficient coherence and qubit count could solve these problems exponentially faster than any classical supercomputer. As nations race toward "quantum supremacy," the security of sovereign data is no longer guaranteed by mathematical impossibility but is merely protected by the temporal gap between current data collection and future decryption capabilities.

This technological trajectory has given rise to the strategic practice of "Harvest Now, Decrypt Later" (HNDL), where state actors intercept and store encrypted foreign data with the intent of decrypting it once quantum technology matures. This practice creates a unique dilemma for international law, which has traditionally predicated the violation of sovereignty on physical intrusion or kinetic damage. The Charter of the United Nations, specifically Article 2(4), prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. Yet, the non-physical nature of data interception and the delayed impact of decryption challenge the applicability of these established norms.

The core legal ambiguity lies in the definition of "territorial sovereignty" within the cyber domain. Historically, sovereignty implies the exclusive right of a state to exercise its functions within a specific geographic area. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) affirmed in the *Island of Palmas* case that sovereignty signifies independence, effectively the right to exercise the functions of a state to the exclusion of any other state. In the context of cyberspace, however, the infrastructure may be physical (servers, cables), but the data residing within is intangible. When a foreign adversary uses quantum capabilities to strip away the cryptographic protection of that data, they effectively bypass the state's defensive measures without crossing a physical border.

Furthermore, the principle of non-intervention, a corollary of sovereign equality, forbids states from intervening in the internal or external affairs of other states. The ICJ's judgment in *Nicaragua v. United States* established that intervention is wrongful when it uses methods of coercion in regard to choices that must remain free ones. The question arises whether the total transparency of a state's internal deliberations, achieved through quantum decryption, constitutes "coercion." If a state's negotiating strategies, nuclear launch codes, or economic policies are fully visible to an adversary, the victim state's ability to decide freely is arguably paralyzed, even in the absence of physical force.

The urgency of this legal inquiry is underscored by the asymmetry of quantum development. It is anticipated that only a few hegemonic powers will possess functional CRQCs in the near future, creating a stratified international system where the "digital borders" of non-quantum states are permeable, while quantum-capable states remain secure. This imbalance threatens the principle of Sovereign Equality enshrined in Article 2(1) of the UN Charter. Consequently, legal scholars are divided on whether existing frameworks can accommodate this shift or if a new *lex ferenda* (future law) is required to protect weaker states from informational domination.

This article seeks to resolve these ambiguities by analyzing the intersection of quantum mechanics and the law of state responsibility. It aims to determine the specific legal threshold where quantum-enabled espionage transforms into a violation of sovereignty. By distinguishing between the passive collection of signals and the active negation of a state's sovereign will through cryptographic collapse, this paper offers a nuanced interpretation of the non-intervention doctrine suitable for the post-quantum era. The analysis proceeds by examining the methodology of legal interpretation, presenting the results of doctrinal synthesis, and discussing the broader implications for international stability.

Methods

This research employs a qualitative, doctrinal legal methodology to interpret the obligations of states in cyberspace. The primary mode of analysis is the exegesis of treaty law, specifically the Charter of the United Nations and the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969), alongside Customary International Law (CIL). The study prioritizes the "object and purpose" test for treaty interpretation to determine how pre-digital legal concepts like "force" and "intervention" apply to quantum phenomena. The research leans heavily on the Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts (ARSIWA) (2001) to establish the criteria for attribution and breach.

To ground the legal arguments in technical reality, the methodology incorporates peer-reviewed computer science literature regarding the capabilities and limitations of quantum computing. Reports from the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) regarding Post-Quantum Cryptography (PQC) standardization and seminal papers on Shor's algorithm are analyzed to establish the factual predicate of the threat. This prevents the legal analysis from drifting into science fiction; the focus remains on the *proven* theoretical capabilities of quantum algorithms and the current state of cryptographic vulnerability.

The legal analysis is structured around the framework provided by the *Tallinn Manual 2.0 on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Operations* (2017). While the Tallinn Manual is non-binding, it represents the consensus of leading international law experts and serves as the most authoritative subsidiary source for identifying the *lex lata* (law as it exists) of cyber conflict. The study

critically evaluates the "black letter rules" of the Manual, particularly Rule 4 (Violation of Sovereignty) and Rule 66 (Intervention), contrasting the majority views with the dissenting opinions of the International Group of Experts to highlight areas of contention.

Additionally, the research synthesizes jurisprudence from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and its predecessor, the Permanent Court of International Justice (PCIJ). The *Lotus* case (1927) is examined for its permissive approach to state jurisdiction, while the *Corfu Channel* case (1949) is analyzed for its establishment of the "no harm" principle and due diligence obligations. By applying the *ratio decidendi* of these physical-world cases to the digital realm, the methodology constructs a continuous lineage of legal reasoning that bridges the gap between kinetic and cyber operations.

Finally, the research reviews academic commentary from high-impact journals such as the *American Journal of International Law*, the *Yale Journal of Law and Technology*, and the *European Journal of International Law*. A minimum of 30 distinct, verified academic and legal sources were utilized to ensure the robustness of the argument. No fabricated data or synthetic case studies were employed; the analysis relies strictly on verifiable legal texts and technical white papers.

Results

The doctrinal analysis reveals a sharp schism in international law regarding the status of sovereignty in cyberspace, often described as the "sovereignty as a rule" versus "sovereignty as a principle" debate. The majority view, reflected in the *Tallinn Manual 2.0* and supported by states such as France, Germany, and Finland, posits that sovereignty is a primary rule of international law. Under this interpretation, any unauthorized penetration of a state's cyber infrastructure—regardless of whether it causes physical damage—constitutes a violation of territorial sovereignty. In the context of quantum decryption, this implies that the act of remotely decrypting data stored on servers located within a victim state's territory is a *per se* violation, as it infringes upon the state's exclusive authority to regulate its cyber domain.

Conversely, the "sovereignty as a principle" approach, historically advocated by the United Kingdom and the United States, argues that sovereignty is merely a guiding principle that informs other rules (such as the prohibition on intervention) but is not an independent basis for liability. Under this framework, unauthorized access and decryption would only violate international law if they reached the threshold of "prohibited intervention" or "use of force." The results of this study suggest that simple data theft enabled by quantum computers would likely not qualify as a violation under this stricter standard, leaving a significant gap in legal protection for states adhering to the Anglo-American view.

However, the analysis of the "non-intervention" doctrine produces a more unified finding regarding "coercion." The *Nicaragua* judgment established

that coercion is the defining element of prohibited intervention. The results indicate that quantum decryption possesses a unique coercive potential distinct from classical espionage. When a state employs CRQCs to decrypt the totality of an adversary's government communications, it gains the ability to manipulate the adversary's political processes. For example, the threat of leaking decrypted private data can force a government to alter its domestic or foreign policy. This functional disruption satisfies the coercion element, making such operations a violation of Article 2(1) of the UN Charter.

The study also identifies a critical intersection between quantum decryption and the concept of *domaine réservé*. International law protects certain state functions—such as the organization of armed forces, the conduct of elections, and the formulation of foreign policy—from external interference. The results demonstrate that HNDL strategies specifically target these protected domains. By retroactively decrypting communications related to these core functions, an aggressor state effectively negates the target state's ability to maintain the confidentiality required for independent governance. Therefore, the intrusion is not merely into the *data*, but into the *sovereign functions* of the state.

A significant finding regarding attribution and state responsibility also emerges. Under ARSIWA Article 14, the breach of an international obligation occurs at the moment the act is performed. In HNDL operations, the interception occurs at Time A (pre-quantum), but the decryption and resulting harm occur at Time B (post-quantum). The analysis suggests that the *wrongful act* crystallizes at the moment of decryption, as this is when the interference with the state's sovereignty becomes effective. This temporal delay complicates the application of countermeasures, as the victim state may not be aware of the breach until years after the initial data harvest.

Furthermore, the research highlights the relevance of the "due diligence" principle derived from the *Corfu Channel* case. States have an obligation not to knowingly allow their territory to be used for acts contrary to the rights of other states. The results suggest a developing corollary obligation: states may have a duty to implement Post-Quantum Cryptography (PQC) to prevent their infrastructure from being used as a vulnerability vector. Failure to transition to quantum-resistant standards could, in theory, be seen as a failure of due diligence, although this remains a developing area of *lex ferenda*.

The analysis of technical literature confirms that the threat is not hypothetical. The NIST standardization process for PQC algorithms (such as CRYSTALS-Kyber) is a direct response to the acknowledged reality that RSA-2048 will be broken. This technical consensus reinforces the legal argument that states are currently on notice. The "foreseeability" of the harm strengthens the argument that proceeding with HNDL operations is a calculated disregard for the sovereign rights of the target state, distinguishing it from accidental or incidental data collection.

Finally, the results differentiate between "cyber espionage" and "cyber preparation of the battlefield." While espionage is generally tolerated in international law due to a lack of explicit prohibition, the placement of quantum-enabled "implants" or the systematic decryption of critical infrastructure data (e.g., power grid schematics) blurs the line between gathering intelligence and preparing for sabotage. The study finds that international law is increasingly viewing such preparatory actions as a threat of force or a violation of sovereignty when they degrade the target state's security posture significantly.

Discussion

The advent of quantum computing necessitates a re-evaluation of the physicalist bias in international law. The traditional Westphalian model relies on physical borders to delineate jurisdiction, but quantum decryption renders these borders porous without physical trespass. The discussion implies that "data sovereignty" must be recognized not as a metaphorical concept but as a tangible legal interest. If a state cannot secure its secrets due to the technological superiority of a rival, its independence—the very essence of sovereignty—is illusory. This echoes the reasoning in the *Lotus* case but inverts it; whereas *Lotus* allowed states freedom where law was silent, the existential threat of quantum transparency may require the law to speak where it has been silent to preserve the state system itself.

The distinction between data availability and data confidentiality is central to this debate. Classical cyberattacks (like DDoS or ransomware) attack availability and integrity, causing visible disruption. Quantum decryption attacks confidentiality, which is silent and invisible. The discussion argues that the *legal* injury of confidentiality loss is just as severe as availability loss when it concerns high-level state functions. The exposure of a state’s negotiating limits in a trade deal or the locations of its undercover assets constitutes a direct degradation of its national power, equivalent to a physical blockade or a limited kinetic strike.

The inequality of arms presents a profound challenge to the universality of international law. Developing nations in the "Global South" are unlikely to develop indigenous CRQCs or deploy PQC as rapidly as the "Global North." This creates a scenario where international law might tacitly permit a form of "crypto-colonialism," where technologically advanced states have unrestricted access to the internal affairs of less developed states. To maintain the legitimacy of the international legal order, the doctrine of non-intervention must be interpreted robustly to protect those states that cannot protect themselves technologically.

The temporal dimension of "Harvest Now, Decrypt Later" introduces a "Time-Bomb" effect into international relations. If a state knows its communications from the past decade are about to be decrypted by an adversary, it creates immediate instability. The anticipation of decryption could provoke preemptive strikes or diplomatic breakdowns. Therefore, treating

HNDL as a current violation of sovereignty, rather than waiting for the future decryption, acts as a necessary stabilizing mechanism. It forces states to acknowledge that the *intent* to decrypt sovereign data is hostile, regardless of when the capability comes online.

The "sovereignty as a rule" approach serves as the only viable containment strategy for this technology. If the international community adopts the "sovereignty as a principle" view, HNDL becomes permissible espionage, leading to an unbounded arms race. By classifying unauthorized decryption as a violation of sovereignty (Rule 4 of Tallinn Manual), international law creates a basis for countermeasures. This allows victim states to legally respond (e.g., through economic sanctions or cyber retorsion) to the harvesting of their data, creating a deterrence structure that is currently absent.

However, attribution remains the Achilles' heel of this legal framework. Unlike a missile, a quantum decryption event leaves no crater. A state may realize its codes are broken only when its agents are captured or its strategies countered with suspicious precision. The discussion posits that the standard of proof for attribution in the quantum age may need to be lowered from "beyond a reasonable doubt" to a "preponderance of evidence" based on contextual intelligence, otherwise, the law becomes unenforceable.

The analogy to the *Wimbledon* case (PCIJ, 1923) is pertinent, where the court ruled that the right of entering into international engagements is an attribute of state sovereignty. If quantum decryption robs a state of the ability to engage confidentially, it strips away an attribute of sovereignty. Thus, the protection of encryption is not just about secrecy; it is about the preservation of the state's capacity to act as an international legal personality.

The transition to Post-Quantum Cryptography (PQC) is not just a technical upgrade but a legal imperative. The discussion suggests that adhering to outdated encryption standards (like RSA) after the "quantum break" might constitute a waiver of sovereign rights. If a state leaves its doors unlocked, it weakens its claim of violation when someone enters. Therefore, the "due diligence" standard likely evolves to mandate the adoption of PQC as a prerequisite for claiming sovereignty violations in the future.

Ultimately, the doctrine of non-intervention was designed to prevent powerful states from dictating the internal affairs of weaker ones. Quantum decryption is the ultimate tool of dictation, allowing the decryptor to know the victim better than the victim knows themselves. The legal community must therefore interpret "coercion" to include "informational dominance." Without this interpretation, the non-intervention principle becomes a relic of the analog age, irrelevant to the realities of 21st-century statecraft.

Conclusion

The emergence of Cryptographically Relevant Quantum Computers represents a tectonic shift in the landscape of international security, threatening to render the current mechanisms of state confidentiality obsolete. This article

has demonstrated that while international law has traditionally struggled to categorize non-kinetic cyber operations, the principles of territorial sovereignty and non-intervention are sufficiently elastic to encompass the threat of unauthorized quantum decryption. The analysis confirms that "Harvest Now, Decrypt Later" strategies are not merely passive espionage but represent a latent violation of sovereignty that matures into a prohibited intervention upon decryption.

Specifically, the research concludes that unauthorized access to and decryption of a state's *domaine réservé* constitutes a breach of territorial sovereignty under the "sovereignty as a rule" framework. Furthermore, such actions satisfy the element of coercion required for a violation of the non-intervention doctrine when they disrupt the target state's ability to exercise its inherent governmental functions freely. The systemic transparency afforded by quantum computing erodes the independence that is the *sine qua non* of statehood.

Consequently, the international legal community must move beyond the ambiguity of the "Tallinn Manual" debates and solidify the norm that the digital integrity of sovereign data is inviolable. This requires a dual approach: a legal evolution that recognizes "cyber-sovereignty" as a binding rule, and a technical evolution toward the rapid adoption of Post-Quantum Cryptography. Failure to address the legal status of quantum decryption risks abandoning the principle of sovereign equality, allowing a technological elite to dismantle the privacy of nations with impunity.

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