

International Law of Space and Contact: Treaties, Protocols, and Foreign UAP Programs

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Key points

- The space treaties were written for human activity but bear on UAP: OST Article V (report dangers to astronauts), Article IX (avoid harmful contamination), and Article XI (inform the public “to the greatest extent feasible and practicable”).
- The Rescue Agreement, Liability Convention and Registration Convention apply to launched objects; for non-human craft they offer norms and models, including the Cosmos 954 settlement (1981).
- NASA’s 1969 “Extraterrestrial Exposure” rule (former 14 C.F.R. part 1211) is the only U.S. precedent for binding quarantine of extraterrestrial material.
- France (GEIPAN), the United Kingdom, Brazil, Chile, Japan and Canada show a range of national approaches; foreign archives can supply records U.S. agencies withhold.

1. Summary

The space law treaties were written for human activity but contain provisions that apply to UAP and NHI matters:

Instrument	Provision	Relevance
Outer Space Treaty (1967)	Art. V (immediate reporting of phenomena in outer space dangerous to astronauts); Art. VI (state responsibility for national activities, including private ones); Art. VII (liability for damage by launched objects); Art. VIII (jurisdiction over registered objects); Art. IX (due regard; avoid harmful	Reporting duties (Issue A4); contamination (back-contamination from NHI material); consultation before potentially harmful activities

Instrument	Provision	Relevance
	contamination; consultations); Art. XI (inform public and science community “to the greatest extent feasible and practicable”)	
Rescue Agreement (1968)	Return of space objects and personnel found on a state’s territory to the launching authority	Applies to objects “launched into outer space”; does not apply to non-human craft, but sets a norm of return and cooperation
Liability Convention (1972)	Absolute liability for damage on Earth caused by a launching state’s space object	Inapplicable to non-human craft (no “launching state”); useful by analogy for compensation design
Registration Convention (1975)	Registration of launched objects	Non-human objects are unregistered; registration data help distinguish them
Moon Agreement (1979)	Not ratified by U.S.	Limited relevance
UN GA Decision 33/426 (1978)	Invited states to coordinate research on UFOs and report to the Secretary-General	Only GA action on UFOs (Issue A4)
IAA SETI Declaration (1989, 2010, 2026 revision)	Verification, announcement, and no reply without international consultation	Non-binding; norm for scientists
Artemis Accords (2020)	§4 transparency; §6 emergency assistance; §8 release of scientific data; §11 deconfliction of space activities	Political commitments among signatories; §8 preserves each signatory’s right to release information about its own activities, which bears on disclosure of UAP observed in space

2. Planetary protection

OST Art. IX requires states to avoid “harmful contamination” and “adverse changes in the environment of the Earth resulting from the introduction of extraterrestrial matter.” Material of

non-human origin raises back-contamination concerns. The COSPAR Policy on Planetary Protection (2026 version, Space Research Today vol. 224, pp. 17-39 (Jan. 2026)) is the closest technical standard. It is written for missions that return samples from other bodies, not for material that arrives on its own, but its “Restricted Earth return” category states the level of care the scientific community expects for unsterilized extraterrestrial material: “the absolute prohibition of destructive impact upon return,” “containment throughout the return phase of all unsterilized returned hardware which directly contacted the target body and of unsterilized material from the body,” and “containment of any unsterilized sample collected and returned to Earth,” followed by timely analysis (§6.5). The policy is non-binding guidance adopted by a scientific body; for the United States it informs NASA’s own planetary protection requirements and the “appropriate measures” OST Art. IX calls for. Handling of recovered biological evidence of NHI should meet at least the Restricted Earth return containment standard, in a biosafety facility, with documentation suitable for a later chain-of-custody inquiry ([Form E3-1](#)).

2.1 The United States once had a binding quarantine rule

In July 1969, days before Apollo 11 returned, NASA adopted a regulation titled “Extraterrestrial Exposure” (14 C.F.R. part 1211, 34 Fed. Reg. 11974-75 (July 16, 1969)). It cited Article IX of the Outer Space Treaty, authorized NASA to quarantine any “person, property, animal or other form of life or matter whatever” that was “extraterrestrially exposed,” designated the Lunar Receiving Laboratory in Houston as a quarantine station, and made violations punishable. The part has since been removed and Title 14 now shows parts 1210-1211 as reserved. The rule is the only U.S. precedent for binding legal controls on material of extraterrestrial origin, and it is the model a disclosure statute should follow for recovered biological material ([Issue E1](#), E3).

NASA’s current planetary protection requirements for missions (NASA Procedural Requirements 8715.24) govern its own spacecraft and samples and do not reach material that arrives on Earth by other means.

2.2 The one compensation precedent

The only claim ever brought under the Liability Convention arose when the Soviet nuclear-powered satellite Cosmos 954 broke up over northern Canada in January 1978 and scattered radioactive debris. Canada claimed about C\$6 million for cleanup; the parties settled by a protocol signed in Moscow on April 2, 1981, under which the USSR paid C\$3 million. The settlement shows how a damage claim involving a space object can be resolved between states without litigation, and its cleanup-cost basis is a model for compensating damage caused by a craft whose origin no state claims.

3. Foreign government UAP programs and disclosure practice

Country	Program or practice	Notes
France	GEIPAN (within CNES), public case archive since 2007	Most transparent national program
United Kingdom	Ministry of Defence UFO desk	U.K. Freedom of Information

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	and public hotline closed in late 2009 (a 2009 ministerial briefing said no sighting in over 50 years had shown a military threat); MoD files released through The National Archives in ten tranches from 2008, the last (covering 2007-2009) in June 2013	Act 2000 exemptions (ss. 23, 24, 26, 27)
Brazil	The government directed the Air Force to document sightings and transfer the records to the National Archives (Arquivo Nacional), which holds several hundred Air Force UFO records dating from 1952, including the May 19, 1986 “Official UFO Night” interception attempt; releases have continued	Access-to-information law 12.527/2011
Chile	CEFAA (civil aviation authority)	Aviation-focused
Mexico	Congressional hearings (2023-2024)	Political rather than statutory
Japan	Defense Minister Taro Kono’s September 2020 order directing Self-Defense Forces personnel to record, photograph, and report unidentified aerial objects for analysis; a cross-party Diet members’ league on UAP and national security formed in June 2024 (chair Yasukazu Hamada, 80-plus members), which in May 2026 asked the Defense Minister for a dedicated unit to collect and analyze UAP data and report to	Ministerial order; no statute

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	the Diet (as reported in the Japanese press, May 2026)	
Canada	Office of the Chief Science Advisor's Sky Canada Project (launched 2023; report June 2025), recommending that one federal department or agency manage public UAP reporting data and a service to collect accounts, investigate cases, and publish analyses	Recommendations; no statute

Other governments have had smaller programs or released files: Peru's Air Force reopened an office for anomalous aerial phenomena (OIFAA) in 2013; Argentina's Air Force has run a commission on aerospace phenomena; Uruguay's Air Force has maintained a receiving commission (CRIDOVNI) since 1979; and New Zealand, Denmark, and Australia have released defense files. Primary sources: the GEIPAN case archive (cnes-geipan.fr), The National Archives' UFO collection (nationalarchives.gov.uk), Brazil's Arquivo Nacional, and the Sky Canada Project report (Office of the Chief Science Advisor of Canada).

4. Multilateral disclosure

A disclosure involving multiple governments would raise coordination questions: simultaneous announcement; sharing of classified data under bilateral security agreements; joint custody of material; liability for incidents; and harmonized protections for NHI ([Issue F1](#), F2). The UN Office for Outer Space Affairs and COPUOS are the natural fora; policy groups such as the Sol Foundation have proposed international cooperation on the governance of UAP-derived technology.

5. Practice points

- For international advocacy: invoke OST Arts. V, IX, XI and GA Decision 33/426; request national reports to the Secretary-General.
- For researchers: use foreign archives (GEIPAN, The National Archives) for records on events involving U.S. personnel that U.S. agencies withhold.
- For policy drafters: propose a UN framework on reporting, contamination, and treatment of NHI.