

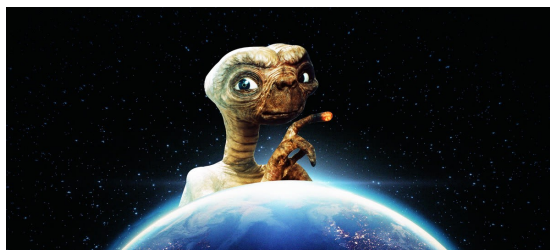
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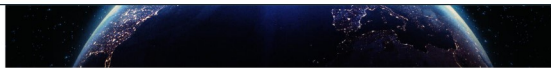
We Need a Diplomatic Game Plan for When We Meet E.T.

| ALIEN AMBASSADOR |

If we don't, we run the risk of upsetting some potentially powerful aliens.

David Axe Updated Sep. 05, 2023 10:16AM EDT
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With new probes, telescopes, and [radio antennae](#), scientists [are intensifying](#) their search for alien civilizations. But it's possible human civilization isn't ready to meet extraterrestrials.

There's no global plan (at least, that the public knows of). No consensus among spacefaring countries on how we should follow up on first contact with an alien civilization. No treaty compelling Earth governments to behave properly toward our new extraterrestrial neighbors.

That's a problem, according to John Gertz, who once sat on the board of the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) Institute in California. He's mostly worried about what happens *after* the search is successful. "One way or another, contact with aliens

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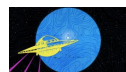
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may be imminent,” he wrote in a [new paper](#) slated to be published in the *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society*, but which has already inspired a serious debate among experts.

“There has been no planning among nations for the aftermath of a first detection,” Gertz told The Daily Beast. “If nations and private parties do not act in concert, the worst-case scenarios are potentially catastrophic.” War could break out on Earth as countries scramble to monopolize the technological spoils of interstellar relations with an advanced alien civilization. Or worse, war could break out between humanity and E.T. after one country or another, acting alone, botches interstellar negotiations.

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Meteorite an
Alien
Spacecraft—
or Just Human
Trash?**



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“This is why we should all be in this together,” Gertz wrote, “and make these tough choices through representative bodies and codify those decisions within an international treaty.”

He even proposed a basic outline for a prospective agreement. This “Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in Humankind’s Relations with Robotic or Biological Extraterrestrial Intelligence” gives all signatories the right to search for aliens, but requires that “all such SETI searches shall be conducted for the benefit of all humankind.” And if someone makes first contact, they must immediately report it to the United Nations.

If the aliens seem hostile, the U.N. would have the power to lock down communications from Earth to E.T.’s home world. If they seem friendly, the U.N. would give whichever

probe or alien institution made contact with Earth the same legal rights as a human ambassador. All communications with the aliens would be vetted by a U.N. committee then approved by the full U.N. General Assembly.

A panel of SETI experts agreed a treaty is a good idea—even imperative. The stakes are too high not to start thinking about Earth-alien relations, they said. Without a treaty, we risk the “extinction of humanity” in the event we or the aliens botch first contact, John Traphagan, a religious-studies professor at the University of Texas who studies first contact, told The Daily Beast. He believes the likeliest bad outcome is that an international race to capitalize on first contact escalates into a nuclear or biological war.

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Hearing Was
Really a
Desperate Call
for Action**



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Traphagan stressed that any first-contact treaty should be co-written by representatives of all 195 countries on Earth, “and not be simply driven by Western powers and particularly the U.S.” After all, it would be especially tempting for the U.S., as the world’s leading space power, to take control of the treaty-writing process.

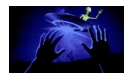
Jason Wright, a Penn State astronomer, told The Daily Beast a treaty should discourage “active” SETI and encourage “passive” SETI. In other words, it should nudge countries toward *listening* for aliens rather than actively broadcasting welcome messages across the cosmos.

“If there are predatory aliens, it would be easy for them to set honey traps—seemingly innocent signals [or] messages whose actual intent is to get species to reveal themselves,” Ken Wisian, a University of Texas geophysicist who

studies first contact, told The Daily Beast. With passive SETI, we'd know about aliens before they knew about us. And that would give us an opportunity to decide whether E.T. is hostile *before* we respond.

Above all, a treaty should be flexible. Our search for alien life is expanding, and fast. At the same time, aliens exist only in our imaginations at present. Sure, they could be hostile—but maybe they'd be friendly. Or maybe the words “hostile” and “friendly” wouldn't apply to whatever they are.

NASA Should Just Say It: We're Looking for Goddamn Aliens



| I WANT TO BELIEVE |

Tony Ho Tran

Maybe they're unknowable until we know them. When it comes to negotiating with aliens, “the details of the right decision will depend in large part on facts about

extraterrestrial others of which we are currently unaware,” Chelsea Haramia, a philosopher at Spring Hill College in Alabama, told *The Daily Beast*.

“However, our potential inability to predict the worst of the worst should not prevent us from recognizing what we *can* anticipate here and now,” Haramia added. Writing a SETI treaty would compel us to think about *homo sapiens* as one species with a shared destiny and a single, fragile planet we call home. We’d be more encouraged to appreciate our shared humanity. “We can seize on this cosmically-motivated opportunity to rally productive discussion,” Haramia said.

A global philosophical readjustment might be the *only* thing to come out of any effort to write a SETI treaty. An actual globally ratified SETI treaty might be too much to ask of a world where the major powers can’t even agree to caps on nuclear weapons. “I

am somewhat skeptical that it would be agreed to,” Wisian said.

Give it time, Gertz said. It took decades for most of the world to agree, however half-heartedly, to do anything about climate change. It might take just as long, or longer, to get the world’s governments to hammer out a legal framework for talking to E.T. “Let’s face it, until quite recently, encounters with aliens were the stuff of tabloid newspapers.”



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