The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties

23 JULY 2026
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The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties: The Foundation of International Agreements

Introduction

When countries sign international agreements, how can they be sure that everyone understands the rules in the same way? Disputes over trade agreements, environmental commitments, and other international treaties often raise questions about how these agreements should be interpreted and applied. The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties provides the framework used to answer these questions. Adopted in 1969, the Convention sets out the rules that states follow when making, interpreting, changing, or ending treaties. Since treaties are a key tool of international cooperation, the rules established by the Vienna Convention for the creation, interpre-

tation, and application of treaties continue to play an important role in relations between states. Understanding the Convention means looking at its purpose, key principles, and continued relevance today.

What Is the Vienna Convention?

States adopted the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties in 1969, and it entered into force eleven years later. Unlike trade, environmental, or human rights treaties, the Vienna Convention is not about a specific issue. Instead, it sets out the rules that apply to treaties in general. Under the Convention, a treaty is understood as a written agreement between states governed by international law. It sets out the procedures that states follow when negotiating, signing, ratifying, interpreting, modifying, and terminating treaties. Together, these rules help states navigate treaty relations more predictably.

Three Key Principles

Several provisions are particularly important for understanding the Convention. One is the principle of "pacta sunt servanda", a Latin expression meaning "agreements must be kept." It requires states to fulfil their treaty obligations in good faith. Without it, states would have little reason to trust that other countries would respect their treaty commitments.

Another important aspect is treaty interpretation. The Convention states that treaties should be interpreted according to the ordinary meaning of their terms, within their context, and in light of their object and purpose. This provides a common basis for resolving disagreements over meaning.

The Convention also includes procedures for modifying or terminating treaties. States may amend agreements by mutual consent, while treaties may also end under specific circumstances recognised by international law.

Why Does It Matter Today?

States use treaties to cooperate on everything from trade to climate policy. For that reason, states continue to rely on the Convention today. Trade agreements, environmental treaties, human rights conventions, and security arrangements all depend on clear legal rules. When states disagree about a treaty's meaning, international courts and tribunals often look to the Vienna Convention for guidance. As a result, the Convention continues to provide a common reference point when legal disagreements arise between states.

Conclusion

The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties forms the foundation of modern treaty law. Its rules help states cooperate through treaties and manage disagreements when they arise. Although most people never hear

about it, the Convention continues to shape how states make and interpret international agreements.

Further Reading

United Nations. (1969). *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties.* https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/1_1_1969.pdf

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