

STATUS OF CONTRACTS FOR EXPLORATION IN THE AREA



05



Who is exploring where for which resources?

The areas explored are in the CCZ, the Indian Ocean, the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and the Northwest Pacific Ocean.



Figure 11. Map of regions explored for mineral resources in the Area



ISA has issued 30 contracts to 21 contractors for the exploration for three types of mineral resources in the Area: PMN, PMS and CFC (Figure 11). States sponsoring these contracts include nine developing States and six SIDS (Cook Islands, Jamaica, Kiribati, Nauru, Singapore and Tonga). Contracts are granted for an initial period of

15 years (Figure 12). Exploration activities consist primarily of geological studies, mineral resource assessment and environmental surveys and sampling and have very limited or no environmental impact. Other activities include developing and testing mining technology and mineral processing techniques.

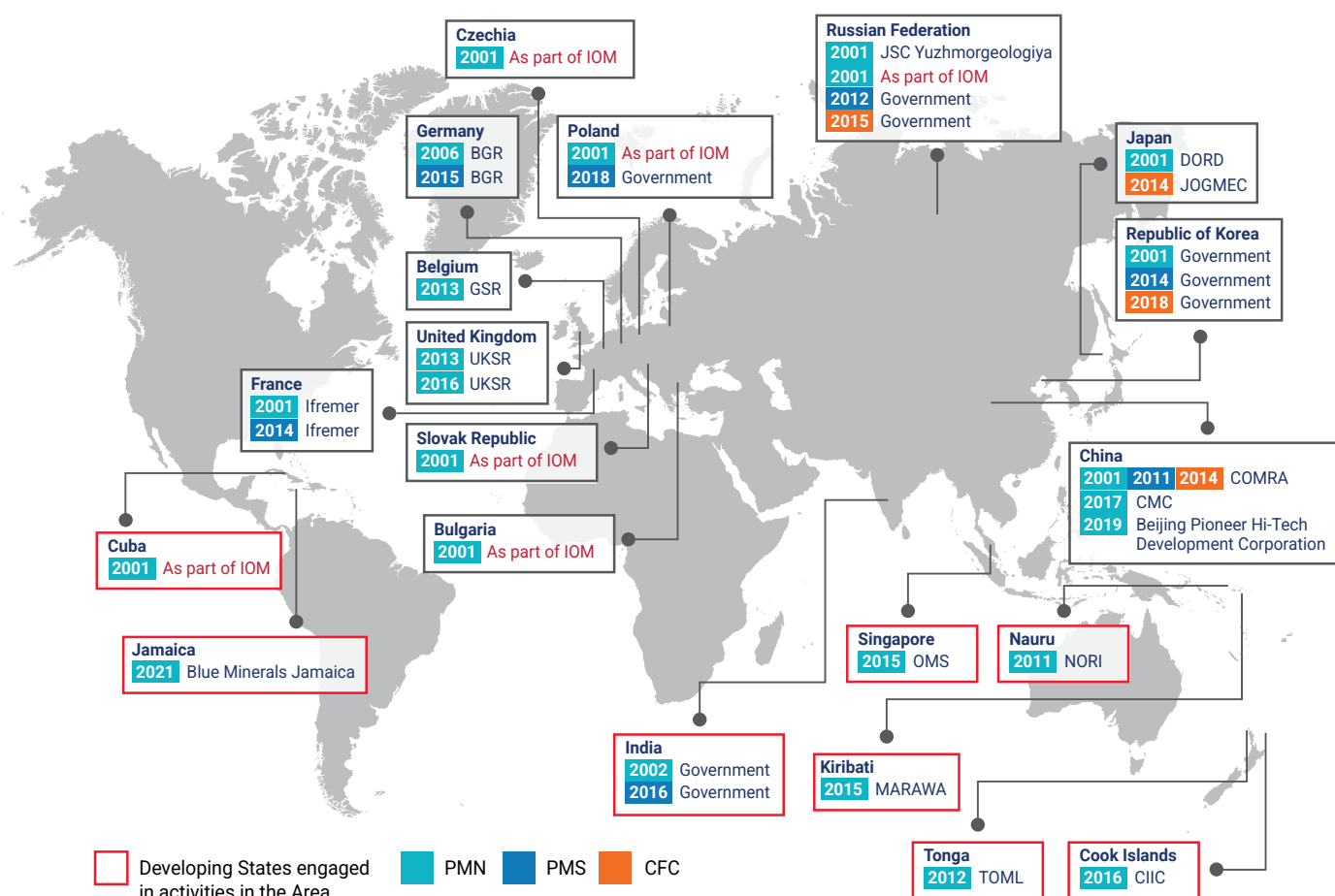


Figure 12. ISA exploration contractors and sponsoring States

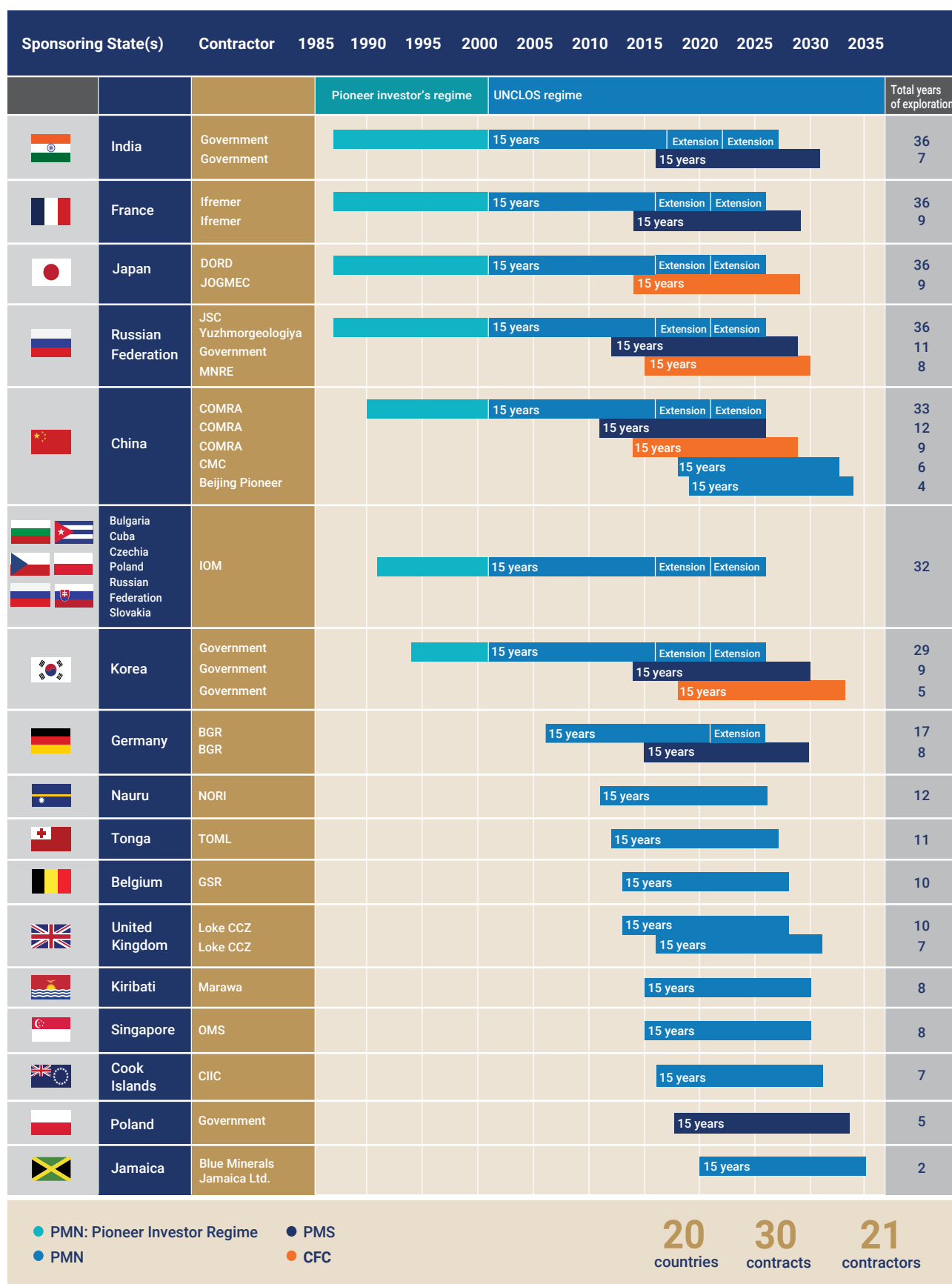


Figure 13. Exploration contracts with ISA

Compliance assurance and regulatory management



Under UNCLOS, Article 153(4), ISA is required to exercise such control over activities in the Area as is necessary for securing compliance with the relevant provisions of UNCLOS, Part XI and the related annexes, the 1994 Agreement, the rules, regulations and procedures of ISA and approved plans of work for exploration.

The Secretariat's Compliance Assurance and Regulatory Management Unit (CARMU) was established in 2022 as the successor to the Contract Management Unit to act as the central administrative point of contact between contractors, sponsoring States and the other organs of ISA. CARMU promotes and facilitates communication and collaboration among key stakeholders as well as the coordination of activities. Its primary function is to serve as the principal point of entry in the Secretariat for the contractors. It also facilitates the Secretariat to fulfil its specific responsibilities under UNCLOS, the 1994 Agreement and the rules, regulations and procedures with respect to the supervision and control of activities in the Area.

CARMU is led by the Chief of CARMU, who reports to the Secretary-General through the Chief of Staff and Head of the Strategic Planning Unit. Following the recruitment to the three positions in 2023, CARMU is now fully staffed, including the Quality Assurance and Compliance Officer, the Contract Management Officer and the Administrative Assistant, who report directly to the Chief of CARMU.

To help achieve its goal, CARMU focuses on the following seven objectives that are aligned with relevant ISA strategic directions and high-level actions:

- **Objective 1:** Strengthen the capability of CARMU and enhance collaboration with ISA offices and other partners
- **Objective 2:** Effectively manage applications for approval of plans of work for prospecting, exploration or exploitation, the extension of the plan of work for exploration or exploitation and renunciation of rights
- **Objective 3:** Provide sound management oversight on active exploration and exploitation contracts
- **Objective 4:** Enhance contract management through the operationalization of the seabed mining register
- **Objective 5:** Develop, review and implement standard operating procedures and guidelines relevant to CARMU
- **Objective 6:** Provide relevant information and sound advice to the Secretary-General and the LTC
- **Objective 7:** Support contractors in the application of relevant rules, regulations and procedures

Monitoring of exploration activities

Annual reports

Under the exploration regulations, contractors are required to submit annual reports to the Secretary-General on the progress of exploration activities carried out against the approved plan of work for exploration.

The annual reports also provide ISA with critical data and information, including environmental baseline data, which may be used to evaluate, analyse and assess the potential environmental impacts of future exploitation activities and inform the development of rules, regulations and procedures pertaining to activities in the Area. All non-confidential information that contractors provide, including environmental data, is available to the public in the DeepData database.

The LTC reviews and evaluates the annual reports and the exploration work carried out by contractors each year. To support the LTC, the scientific and technical staff of the Secretariat conducts a preliminary evaluation of the annual reports, highlighting areas to which the LTC should give additional attention. This includes a review of the integrity and quality of data submitted by contractors. The comments and recommendations of the LTC's evaluation are sent to each contractor through the Secretary-General.

Periodic reviews

The exploration regulations also require each contractor and the Secretary-General to jointly undertake a periodic review of the implementation of the plan of work for exploration at intervals of five years. The periodic review process includes the submission of a comprehensive five-year periodic report by the contractor, the LTC reviews the report and the Secretariat undertakes the evaluation of the report. Among other things, the review process produces an agreement between the Secretary-General and the contractor on a programme of activities to be implemented over the next five-year period of the contract, consistent with the overall plan of work for exploration.

Between July 2023 and June 2024, two periodic review reports were submitted: the periodic review of the implementation of the plans of work of the JOGMEC relating to their contract for exploration for CFC and the GSR relating to their contract for exploration for PMN. Both review reports are under evaluation, with an anticipated completion date of May 2024. As of April 2024, the Secretariat had been informed that two additional periodic review reports, from the COMRA relating to their contract of exploration for CFC and from the Government of the Republic of Korea relating to their contract for exploration for PMS, should be submitted by June 2024.



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Supervisory inspections

During the reporting period, CARMU inspected the UKSR exploration activities in the Area. The overall objective of the inspection was to review UKSR's programme of activities for 2025 and 2026, the remaining two years of the current five-year programme. In addition, it was to ascertain, based on the contractor's reports to be provided during the inspection, whether the contractor had addressed the recommendations and comments of the LTC following the review of the contractor's annual work plan for 2021 and 2022. Based on the review of the information supplied by UKSR, the organizational performance improvements following the acquisition have been comprehensive, with reassurance on the part of the new parent company of UKSR to advance exploration activities and meet contractual obligations for the UKSR contract area.

Criteria for identifying contractors that have responded insufficiently or incompletely, or failed to respond, to the calls from the Council to address issues identified

In response to the Council's request regarding the naming of contractors that had responded insufficiently or incompletely or failed to respond to the calls from the Council to address issues of concern identified by the LTC in relation to the fulfilment of their contractual obligations, the LTC adopted criteria for identifying contractors at risk of non-compliance during its meetings held under Part I of the 29th session.⁷⁶ CARMU will facilitate the three-step process through which the LTC will assess the responses of contractors to concerns identified and communicated by the Secretary-General in relation to their contractual obligations upon the conclusion of the review of annual reports submitted by contractors.

Modalities for facilitating an exchange of views between contractors and members of the LTC

Following the adoption by the LTC of the modalities for facilitating an exchange of views with contractors, it was agreed that CARMU would facilitate the process by assisting in identifying topics and issues to be discussed and organizing and moderating the exchange of views between contractors and LTC members according to the modalities adopted by the latter.⁷⁷

Extension of exploration contracts

On 19 March 2024, the Secretary-General signed the extension agreement for the exploration for PMN between ISA and JSC Yuzhmorgeologiya.

Relinquishment

In the case of contracts for exploration for PMS and CFC, contractors have an obligation to relinquish part of the original exploration area at periodic intervals. Relinquished areas revert to the Area.

These obligations are stated in Regulation 27 of the Regulations on prospecting and exploration for PMS in the Area⁷⁸ and Regulation 27 of the Regulations on prospecting and exploration for CFC in the Area.⁷⁹

In October 2023, Ifremer submitted a report on the relinquishment of 50 per cent of the area allocated to it under the exploration contract for PMS. During Part I of the 29th session, the Council took note of the relinquishment by the Ifremer.⁸⁰ **Table 5** shows the relinquishments that have been made by the end of the reporting period.

⁷⁶ ISA. 2024. Criteria for identifying contractors that have responded insufficiently or incompletely, or failed to respond, to the calls from the Council to address issues identified by the Commission in relation to their contractual obligations ([ISBA/29/LTC/5](#)).

⁷⁷ ISA. 2024. Modalities for facilitating an exchange of views between contractors and members of the Legal and Technical Commission ([ISBA/29/LTC/6](#)).

⁷⁸ ISA. 2010. Decision of the Assembly of the International Seabed Authority relating to the regulations on prospecting and exploration for polymetallic sulphides in the Area ([ISBA/16/A/12/Rev.1](#)), Annex.

⁷⁹ ISA. 2012. Decision of the Assembly of the International Seabed Authority relating to the Regulations on Prospecting and Exploration for Cobalt-rich Ferromanganese Crusts in the Area ([ISBA/18/A/11](#)), Annex.

⁸⁰ ISA. 2024. Report on the relinquishment of 50 per cent of the area allocated to the Institut français de recherche pour l'exploitation de la mer (Ifremer) under the contract for exploration for polymetallic sulphides between Ifremer and the International Seabed Authority: Note by the secretariat ([ISBA/29/C/8](#)).

Table 5. Relinquished parts of contract areas for PMS and CFC that have returned to the Area

	Contractor	First relinquishment of 50% of the original area (due by year 8)	Second relinquishment of 75% of the original area (due by year 10)
PMS	COMRA	Completed	Completed
	Russian Federation	Completed	Completed
	Republic of Korea	Completed	Deferred to 31 Dec 2026
	Ifremer	Completed	Deferred to 18 Nov 2025
	BGR	Deferred to 6 May 2024	Deferred to 6 May 2026
	Government of India	Deferred to 30 September 2026	25 Sep 2026
	Government of Poland	11 Feb 2026	11 Feb 2028
CFC	JOGMEC	Completed	27 Jan 2024
	COMRA	Completed	28 Apr 2024
	Russian Federation	Completed	9 Mar 2025
	Republic of Korea	Completed	26 Mar 2028

Informal consultations between contractors and the Secretary-General

Since 2017, the Secretary-General has held six annual consultative meetings with contractors to discuss issues of common interest and share best practices in deep-sea exploration. These meetings also served as an opportunity to discuss the role of ISA in a global context and engage the support and cooperation of contractors in the programmatic work of ISA.

In collaboration with the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania, the Sixth annual consultation, attended by 22 representatives of exploration contractors, took place

in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, from 22 to 24 October 2023. Participants discussed the progress made by the Council in advancing the draft regulations on the exploitation of mineral resources in the Area, compliance with the implementation of exploration contracts by contractors and how to facilitate direct interaction between LTC and contractors. Discussions were also held on enhancing collaboration among contractors and the transition from exploration to exploitation. The next annual consultation will be hosted by the Institute of Ocean Science and Technology in October 2024 in the Republic of Korea.

