

# COMMENT

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NASA



NASA astronaut Deke Slayton and Soviet cosmonaut Alexey Leonov in the Soyuz spacecraft.

## First Moon landing was nearly a US–Soviet mission

As today's tensions mount, it is salutary to recall that cooperation was on the table during the cold war, writes **Roger D. Launius**.

The Apollo programme that took humans to the Moon is properly viewed as an outgrowth of the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Today, as strained US relations with foreign powers threaten science once more, it is worth recalling how

surprisingly close the Moonshot came to becoming a cooperative venture.

On 25 May 1961, President John F. Kennedy announced the US commitment to astronauts reaching the Moon by the end of the decade, stoking Americans' patriotism and pioneer spirit — a particularly

fascinating period for me, a former chief historian of NASA. As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of Apollo 11's successful Moon landing, few people are aware that almost immediately afterwards, Kennedy explored the possibility of bringing the Soviet Union — then the only other spacefaring nation ▶

► — into the venture as a full partner. This would have reshaped the programme from one of competition into one that fostered international cooperation.

Kennedy proposed as much to the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, at their first and only summit in June 1961. Khrushchev insisted that such discussion should await the negotiation of a nuclear-test-ban treaty. Kennedy revisited the idea of cooperation repeatedly thereafter. By autumn 1963, his vision was to form an Apollo programme that would build bridges between the two superpowers, instead of heightening cold-war rivalries.

But the timing never worked. A series of conflicts between the two nations in 1961 and 1962 — in the stand-off that led to the construction of the Berlin Wall, the Cuban missile crisis and so on — blunted efforts at genuine cooperation.

Nonetheless, by September 1963, relations had improved and Kennedy invited the Soviet Union to work with the United States. Addressing the United Nations, he offered the vision of a joint lunar expedition. “Space offers no problems of sovereignty,” he said, and spoke of sending scientists to the Moon as representatives of all countries, not of a single nation.

By that time, Khrushchev had started to think the idea had merit, but Kennedy’s assassination on 22 November 1963 scotched the plan. The Americans went on to win the space race, and landed Apollo astronauts on the Moon six times between July 1969 and December 1972. The Soviets tried and failed in their own landing programme, although their robotic sample-return missions were a success.

### STRAINED RELATIONS

Still, cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union in space remained a constant subtext throughout the cold war. Often informal, this enjoyed varying degrees of support from national leaders on both sides. The most significant venture came as a result of the detente during the early 1970s, and led to the highly successful Apollo–Soyuz Test Project in 1975. This saw a US and a Soviet spacecraft dock in orbit, and got cosmonauts and astronauts working together on experiments.

The conclusion of the cold war ushered in a new era of joint space endeavours. For the duration of the US Space Shuttle programme (between 1981 and 2011) and the International Space Station (ISS; continuously occupied since 2000), NASA has worked with several international partners. Since 1992, that has included the Russian space agency, Roscosmos.

Bringing Russia into the international coalition that constructed the ISS in 1993 was a trailblazing achievement. It has had its difficulties — what long-standing



Then US President John F. Kennedy shakes hands with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna.

relationship does not have rough patches? But, unquestionably, it has been a stunning success. When the significance of the ISS is reconsidered in the next century and beyond, I think that its greatest achievement will be seen as promoting peaceful cooperation among many nations.

The United States and Russia have uniquely complementary capabilities, and they have been at each other’s side for more than 25 years as humans push back the final frontier. Through their efforts, low Earth orbit has become a normal realm of human activity. Russia’s Soyuz spacecraft transport system, the US Space Shuttle and the various space stations have made Earth orbit feel like a backyard. We are beginning to see the expansion of orbital commerce, all to the good, and perhaps the prospect of a return to the Moon through a broad international consortium, including the United States and Russia.

All that history puts recent scuffles in new light. One was the January decision by NASA administrator Jim Bridenstine to withdraw an invitation to the head of

Roscosmos, Dmitry Rogozin, to visit the United States. It highlights geopolitical challenges that have long been present, especially with the Soviet Union and now Russia. Rogozin was serving as Russia’s deputy prime minister in 2014, and was outspoken when the United States imposed sanctions over Moscow’s annexation of the Crimean Peninsula that year. The Russian space agency warned that Bridenstine’s decision could lead to the termination of existing cooperative agreements and make future deals more difficult. Given decades of history, this is doubtful, but possible.

The fact is, every aspect of space exploration and development advances through cooperative initiatives. At present, the human spaceflight programmes of all nations have been most successful when inextricably linked to each other. Disentangling them would be difficult, expensive, time-consuming and foolhardy.

For decades, the United States and Russia have had terrestrial differences. These should remain on Earth. Cooperation in space continues to light the way, and should be encouraged by all sides. ■

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