

# Imagining Cooperation

## Cold War Aesthetics for a Hot Planet

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### Abstract

What does cooperation between rival superpowers look like? Do global issues have the capacity to rise above the geopolitics of the day and trigger alignment between rival powers? This paper argues the Cold War joint space exploration program between the United States and USSR provides a lesson on the limits of cooperation. These limits, I suggest, are not only a matter of power preferences, institutional differences, material disincentives, or even a consequence of a tendency for free-riding. Rather, they are also the result of incompatible “common sense” perceptions. Cooperation, even if institutionally viable, as in the case of the joint space program, can be constrained due to a lack of popular endorsement and legitimacy.

To develop the argument, I examine the aesthetics of cooperation rendered through widely circulated media images associated with space cooperation during the Cold War. I argue the Cold War imaginary can serve as both critique and inspiration for today’s attempts to legitimize cooperation on global issues such as climate change. It provides insights on the role of “common sense” perceptions and the ways in which they inform questions concerning universality, the role of affect, and the allure of competition.

**Keywords:** Cooperation, Cold War, Visual politics, global issues, legitimacy

With US-China relations at an all-time low, and a US administration persistently keen on drawing a line between democracies and autocracies, cooperation on issues of global concern, such as the climate crisis, has become

a nonentity, falling off completely from public view. Yet, at a time of record-breaking temperatures, melting ice caps, and warnings of a “ghastly future of mass extinction, declining health and climate-disruption upheavals,”<sup>1</sup> shouldn’t an issue with global ramifications be a top priority for the two leading superpowers? How is their noncooperation legitimized? Or, is cooperation simply unimaginable?

In the standard oeuvre of academic literature, political science, and international relations in particular, the debate around global cooperation often centers on various aspects of rationality and power. Realism posits that cooperation between states, if at all possible, is a reflection of power distribution and contingent on (rational) strategic preferences.<sup>2</sup> Noncooperation, in turn, is the result of strategic choices made in pursuit of a preferred national agenda; a refusal to cooperate does not have to be justified beyond the fact that it might contradict such strategic preferences. In fact, and according to the realists, entirely the opposite is true: opposition, and the capacity to compete, become the ultimate signs of power and capability. For proponents of liberalism, while power and strategic preferences matter, cooperation is seen as the product of institutional arrangements.<sup>3</sup> To this end, a failure to cooperate can be legitimated on the grounds of inadequate institutional mechanisms. For constructivists, cooperation is possible on the basis of values, ideas, and shared norms.<sup>4</sup> Noncooperation would therefore be the natural result of different values and ideas: the aforementioned distinction between democracies and autocracies can result in cooperation failure undergirding ontological differences on a matter of great significance to the two

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1. P. Weston, “Top Scientists Warn of ‘Ghastly Future of Mass Extinction’ and Climate Disruption,” *Guardian*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jan/13/top-scientists-warn-of-ghastly-future-of-mass-extinction-and-climate-disruption-aoe>.

2. See especially K. N. Waltz, *Realism and International Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

3. R. O. Keohane and J. S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (Boston: Longman, 2012).

4. A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

opposing sides. Beyond these standard accounts, a number of scholars have also conceptualized the question of cooperation around global concerns from the vantage point of the issue, or object, itself. Namely, for proponents of object-centered theories, cooperation is possible because of the universal nature of the issue itself.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the need for cooperation emerges not because of actors' individual preferences, rationalities, or power positions but because issues with potentially universal impact (such as climate change or poverty) create a space for cooperation and channel a collective action approach beyond individual government preferences.<sup>6</sup> Such accounts, while insightful, assume societal perceptions converge with government positions: be those in pursuit of allegedly universal challenges or for the purposes of reasserting state power. As such, these accounts tend to overlook questions of legitimacy and "common sense" social perceptions.

This article suggests the need for a new approach to cooperation, one which considers how broad-based "common sense" perceptions and affective reactions provide orientation and legitimacy to collaborative action. Certainly, a choice of cooperation or competition in the global arena might be entirely of a government's choosing. Yet, this article argues such choices still demand legitimacy and social acceptance. Cooperation, especially at times of extreme ideological confrontation, needs to align with an overarching common sense understanding of threats and opportunities. Indeed, the need to legitimize government actions is equally valid in both democratic and non-democratic settings. For example, as Elizabeth Perry has

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5. H. Bulkeley, *Accomplishing Climate Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); O. Corry, *Constructing a Global Polity: Theory, Discourse and Governance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); B. B. Allan, "Producing the Climate: States, Scientists, and the Constitution of Global Governance Objects," *International organization* 71 (2017): 131–62.

6. See, for example, the work of Clark Miller for an argument on how the constitution of the climate helped to produce the very idea of global governance: C. A. Miller, *Climate Science and the Making of a Global Political Order* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

masterfully argued, the Chinese government resorts to a sophisticated form of cultural governance in order to legitimize its political authority.<sup>7</sup> This is enabled not only by perpetually asserting historical and cultural narratives and images in the public sphere but also by engaging in the meticulous work of gauging and guiding public sentiment. As such, the question of legitimacy is a question of visual politics whereby the realm of visuality and the common sense perceptions it informs, play a critical role in the overarching viability and perpetuity of the ruling regime.

To develop the argument, the article proposes a phenomenological reading on the aesthetics of cooperation. I briefly elaborate on the choice of both aesthetics and phenomenology. Building on Jacques Rancière's conceptualization of the politics of aesthetics,<sup>8</sup> my examination concerns the visual politics of cooperation: how cooperation is seen through various representations and can therefore be felt, thought of, and accepted as common sense understanding. The proposition that visuality and images play a major role in international relations and inform every aspect of social interactions, emotions, and thinking is not new. Images, as W. J. T. Mitchell says, are "active players in the game of establishing and changing values."<sup>9</sup> Over the past two decades, a growing engagement with visuality and the politics of aesthetics has enriched and complicated the study of international relations. Here, *aesthetics* is not meant to signify a study of beauty. Instead, it concerns the realm of visibility: what can be seen and can therefore be sensed, felt, thought, and accepted as "common sense." An interrogation of the politics of aesthetics, therefore, entails a critical exploration of how visuality sculpts our collective values, our perceptions, and understandings of what is permissible, legible, and "common sensical." Starting from the premise that our knowledge of the world is based on what is made visible and what remains hidden, a critical

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7. E. J. Perry, "Cultural Governance in Contemporary China: 'Re-orienting' Party Propaganda," in V. Shue and P. Thornton, *To Govern China: Evolving Practices of Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

8. J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

9. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Pictorial Turn* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018).

engagement with the politics of aesthetics and the role of images allows for interrogation of our ways of looking, seeing, evaluating, and thinking frame questions of legitimacy. It allows for exploration of how the realm of visuals delineates what is “sensible” and, by extension, what is thinkable, meaningful, valuable, and acceptable. In other words, looking at interactions from the politics of aesthetics perspective enables interrogation of the power of images in constituting collective notions of “common sense” and what are the “conditions of possibilities” for potential transformation of values, affect, and thoughts by making visible and sayable alternative realities.<sup>10</sup>

Using such insights, a number of international relations scholars have argued that visual artifacts not only depict politics,<sup>11</sup> but can also shape collective understanding of issues ranging from violence and security to sovereignty and trauma.<sup>12</sup> One such example comes from the massive public outcry against the US War on Terror. This outcry was triggered as a response to the widespread circulation of graphic photographs of torture by US troops of detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison facility. Prior to the graphic images, there was ample knowledge of both the War on Terror and torture techniques but no public attention given to the issue. It was the horrific visual displays of abuse and maltreatment that sparked international outrage and demands for accountability, including US Congressional hearings and investigations.<sup>13</sup> Even if there was no significant alteration of US foreign policies as a result; globally, the images came to be recognized as symbols of US abuse of power and loss of legitimacy.

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10. R. Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018).

11. R. Bleiker, “Writing Visual Global Politics: in Defence of a Pluralist Approach—A Response to Gabi Schlag, ‘Thinking and Writing Visual Global Politics,’” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 32 (2019): 115–23.

12. See, for example, J. Vuori and R. Saugmann, *Visual Security Studies: Sights and Spectacles of Insecurity and War* Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2018; R. Adler-Nissen, K. E. Andersen, and L. Hansen, “Images, Emotions, and International Politics: The Death of Alan Kurdi,” *Review of International Studies* 46 (2020): 75–95; K. Grayson and J. Mawdsley, “Scopic Regimes and the Visual Turn in International Relations: Seeing World Politics through the Drone,” *European Journal of International Relations* 25 (2020): 431–57.

13. US Cong., Resolution of Inquiry Regarding Pictures, H. Rept. No. 108–547 (2004).

In turning to images, I also combine the politics of aesthetics perspective with the concept of (dis)orientation, developed most prominently in Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*.<sup>14</sup> As Ahmed argues, with phenomenology we can interrogate how norms or orientations "shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention toward."<sup>15</sup> Ahmed's interrogation of how we come to be oriented; how orientations come to be; how they are revealed, obscured, and interpreted speak directly to the complex ways in which common sense perceptions come into being. Ahmed's insights therefore allow me to consider the connections between common sense and orientation, and how visibility and sight become the source of (dis)orientation, affecting notions of identity, reality, and universal values. Approaching international cooperation from the vantage point of images and the politics of aesthetics, the article explores the sights and sites that provide orientation, sculpt different common sense understandings, and contribute to notions of legitimacy. A turn to visibility, and an interrogation of how visibility can "turn" us, alerts us to the ways in which cooperation is as much a product of affective, cultural, and political realities as it is the result of strategic interests, global dominance agendas, universal values, and technological aspirations.<sup>16</sup>

Analyzing moments of (dis)orientation and the construction of common sense perceptions, this article will first elaborate on the argument by exploring the imaginary of cooperation and universal values in a setting of extreme hostility and ideological confrontation: the US-USSR space exploration during the Cold War. The article will then briefly explore the ongoing tussle between the United States and China and consider some Cold War insights in relation to the current prospects for cooperation on the climate crisis.

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14. S. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

15. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 3.

16. See also H. McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

Certainly, the Cold War and the present moment are not fully comparable in terms of scope, timing, and nature of interactions, and neither are contemporary challenges akin to the dynamics of bipolarity more than half a century ago. Yet, turning to the Cold War period provides a fruitful way of exploring not only the possibilities for cooperation on an issue of global proportions but also whether or how such cooperation was able to find legitimacy: how it was imagined and made “common sensical” at a time of extreme hostility and distrust toward the opposite side. The article proceeds in three parts. It first explores the aesthetics of Cold War space cooperation as represented in two popular magazines—the American *Time* magazine<sup>17</sup> and the Soviet *Krokodil*.<sup>18</sup> Next, the article maps out the aesthetics of cooperation emerging from Cold War imagery onto contemporary representations of climate cooperation between the United States and China. The final section draws conclusions on the possibilities for cooperation and the insights phenomenology can contribute to the study of legitimacy and societal common sense orientations.

## Dining with the Enemy

Contrary to popular renderings of the past, the period of the Cold War did indeed mark the start of a prominent cooperation between the United States and the USSR on an issue of global proportions and significance: space exploration. Despite considerable challenges over the decades, collaborative space exploration outlived ideological hostilities between the rival governments and continued even beyond the existence of the USSR. The space program seemingly reaffirmed the notion that global issues have the capacity

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17. *Time* Magazine was founded in 1923. The distinctive cover featuring a prominent image associated with current news events was introduced in 1927.

18. *Krokodil* was founded in 1922 and was published once a week. *Krokodil* used caricature and visuals to lampoon political figures and events. It discontinued publication after the collapse of the Soviet Union (apart from a brief reinstatement from 2005 to 2008).

to rise above the geopolitics of the day. Accordingly, what allegedly made cooperation in space legitimate was the universal nature of space itself and the fact that its unknown vastness could not be tackled by one country alone. At the same time, collaboration would ensure that this spatial universe benefits the entirety of humanity, not individual nations.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the US-USSR space exploration program also remains the source of a curious paradox: although the cooperation itself began as early as the 1960s and continued for many decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the popular imaginary and memories of the period tend to focus on key moments of space competition—nearly erasing any collective memory of cooperation. Indeed, along with the very notion of the Cold War itself, the two countries' space interactions are remembered from the prism of competition rather than cooperation. Consider how, in the prevailing common sense imaginary and popular memory the US-USSR space interactions are typically associated with “the Space Race” and “Star Wars” and relegated to tropes such as the “First Man on the Moon,” “First Man in Orbit,” “Trailblazers/Pioneers in Space,” etc. Similarly, popular magazines, cartoons, and posters consistently render space as yet another stage for great power competition, a grand contest in scientific and technological prowess and superiority.<sup>20</sup> Today, online search engines also produce many more results and images for “Cold War space competition” than for “Cold War space cooperation.” And there is also the naming: “The Space Race” features prominently on the NASA website and various study materials of the time. In comparison, the singular reference to

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19. This was also Joe Biden's statement after a bilateral summit meeting with Vladimir Putin in 2021; also, see M. Luxmoore, “U.S. and Russia Find Some Common Ground in Space,” *Foreign Policy*, November 3, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/03/us-russia-space-cooperation-nasa-sirius/>.

20. One recent example of this was the 2016 exhibition in Moscow entitled *Внепёд! К звёздам!* (Advance! Towards the stars) featuring posters from the Soviet space program from the 1950s on. Among the forty posters, there is not one image of the space cooperation with the United States. See “Exhibition: ‘Forward! To the Stars!’ Museum of Political History of Russia, accessed October 26, 2022, <http://collectiononline.polithistory.ru/entity/EXHIBITION/3942744> Accessed March 2022.



cooperation, known as “The Handshake in Space,” appears as a momentary, short-lived event, hardly of the same magnitude and significance as the decades-long space competition.

I suggest that this collective amnesia of the factual existence of space cooperation during the Cold War is a matter of affective orientation, driven by both the desire and ability to accept the possibility for cooperation, to see it as a legitimate option. Cooperation is contingent on affect, which, in turn, forms the core nucleus of cooperation: trust and assurance.<sup>21</sup> Yet, it is precisely trust and assurance that tend to be unimaginable at a time of extreme ideological differences. Hence also the condition of affective disorientation, of blocking, and refusing to acknowledge the significance of factual evidence. This is also how, even if cooperation exists on an institutional level, the common sense perception is still framed by representations that both explicitly and implicitly carry a message of distrust and suspicion. As such, competition, rather than cooperation, remains the visible aesthetic frame, (re)orienting perceptions on the range of interactions between opposing powers. This type of (re)orientation is visible not only in the abundant proliferation of images of space competition but even in images allegedly associated with cooperation.

Consider, for example, the representation of a key moment in US-USSR space cooperation: the 1975 Apollo-Soyuz mission. Most commonly known as the “Handshake in Space,” both the mission and associated collaboration were meant to be a grand spectacle. An unprecedented feat of technological mastery, the joint enterprise marked the first time when astronauts from different spacecraft could physically meet and interact outside the Earth. Betting on a grand spectacle, both the United States and the USSR streamed the event—the entire process down to the joint dinner in space—live on television. Meticulous details around the staging of what *Time* magazine named a “Space Spectacular” included a lengthy negotiation involving considerations such as the exact location over the Earth’s surface where the two

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21. E. Ostrom, *Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

spacecraft would intersect and activate the docking platform, details on the meals the two crews would share, the body positioning so that the TV cameras could capture the actual handshake between the two sides, etc.

By all accounts, the Apollo-Soyuz mission marked a moment of unprecedented political achievement, more than a technological breakthrough. Certainly, the development of a docking platform to which both ships could latch onto so that both crews could traverse between the two spacecrafts was important. But, according to many who were part of the process, such platform construction did not require the type of advanced technological know-how and knowledge-sharing that more sophisticated, joint space exploration initiatives might entail. Furthermore, the construction of a docking module at the exorbitant cost of US \$100 million (or the equivalent of \$765 million in 2022) allegedly had limited use after this staged event. In the United States, the revelation of such facts made the entire enterprise quite questionable. Nevertheless, the political significance and effects of the engagement were many. To those involved directly in the launch, including the two crews, the entire process of interaction revealed a host of unexpected similarities.<sup>22</sup> The preparation for the mission humanized a relationship that was otherwise fraught with misinformation and propaganda on both sides. Moreover, the mission greatly benefited from the two sides' sense of "space comradery"<sup>23</sup> and inherent understanding of comparable technological capabilities: each side had had its successes and failures in space exploration, which were equally valuable and informative in crafting the joint mission.

In the aftermath of the joint mission success, both the White House and the Kremlin sought to capitalize on the event as a political opportunity for further cooperation. After hosting the two USSR cosmonauts at the White House, president Gerald Ford argued: "The broader we can make our

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22. Y. Karash, *The Superpower Odyssey: A Russian Perspective on Space Cooperation* (Reston, VA: American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 1999).

23. T. Ellis, "'Howdy Partner!' Space Brotherhood, Detente and the Symbolism of the 1975 Apollo-Soyuz Test Project," *Journal of American Studies* 53 (2019): 744–69.

relations in health, in environment, in space . . . the better it is for us here in America, and for the Soviet Union.”<sup>24</sup> In Ford’s assessment, the mission opened a door to cooperation not as a singular affair but an exemplar of how politicians should aspire to reach an agreement back on Earth. In his words, “Our astronauts can fit together in the most intricate scientific equipment, work together, and shake hands 137 miles out in space, we as statesmen have an obligation to do as well on Earth.”<sup>25</sup>

Accordingly, popular images in both countries followed suit. Aligned with the mood in the White House administration, the cover of the popular Soviet magazine *Krokodil* pictured a “Cold War” caricature squeezed between the two docking spacecraft, helplessly dropping its sword (fig. 1).<sup>26</sup>

One interpretation of the image could be that the entire purpose of the two spacecraft in space was to show how the Cold War was meant to end. Indeed, the sheer force of the two spacecraft joining above the Earth creates the impression that the Cold War had run out of options to rule over the globe and had just lost its weapon/sword of destruction.

Yet, the *Krokodil* image also allows for an alternative, noncelebratory interpretation. In a different way of seeing, the central subject is not space exploration or collaboration. Rather, it is a spectacle of sheer violence. To someone unaware of the joint mission and the attempt to connect the two spacecraft, the image could appear as a moment of collision between two rockets set against one another. This impression is enhanced by the prominent lines depicting the trajectory of movement of the two spacecraft, suggesting not a moment of rest, cojoining, and docking but of an impending crash. The fantastical image of the Cold War stricken by the collision could also be reinterpreted as an attempt by the Cold War “himself” to avoid further escalation of hostilities: if the two spacecraft were to clash, then

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24. Quoted in Ellis, “‘Howdy Partner!’”

25. J. Naughton, “Ford Bids Nations Live Up to Spirit of Helsinki Pact,” *New York Times*, August 2, 1975, 1.

26. “СОЮЗ-АПОЛЛОН. Маневры на орбите” [Soyuz-Apollo: On-orbit maneuvers], Live Journal, accessed October 26, 2022, <https://1500py470.livejournal.com/136067.html>.



# КРОКОДИЛ

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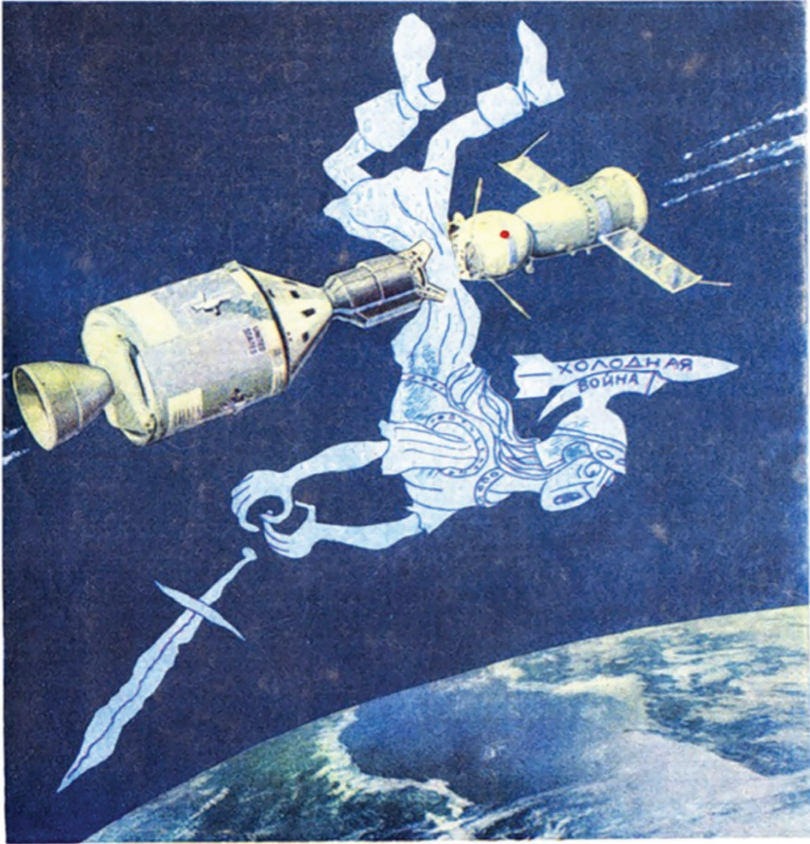


Figure 1: *Krokodil*. Accessed at “СОЮЗ-АПОЛЛОН: Маневры на орбите” [Soyuz-Apollo: On-orbit maneuvers], Live Journal.

Source: <https://1500py470.livejournal.com/136067.html>

most likely an armed confrontation, and a Hot War, would ensue. Furthermore, the notion that the actual Cold War would cease cannot be sustained because the Cold War character would be free to roam around again once the two spacecraft discontinue their joint operation.

A similar dichotomy and conflicting interpretation are visible in the American rendering of the “Handshake in Space” mission. As mentioned, the *Time* magazine cover did call the event a “Space Spectacular” (fig. 2). Nevertheless, it stopped short of the fantastic representations of cooperation and mythmaking depicted in the Soviet imagery.

The *Time* cover instead features a handshake where each hand is symbolically painted in ideograms associated with the American and Soviet flags. The handshake itself could be seen as a realistic rendering of the actual event and the televised handshake between the astronauts. But, beyond this realism, the cover itself is also suggestive of the multiple ways in which the joint space mission failed to capture the American imagination and instead became a reason to bury collaborative engagements into the realm of invisibility. Take, for example, the complete erasure of the vast cosmic space and the imaginative sense of exploration beyond the boundaries of the Earth featured on the Soviet image. Similarly, there are no hints of technology, science, or spacecraft—all of which form the very essence of the joint enterprise. Indeed, to a viewer not familiar with the Apollo-Soyuz mission, the image of the handshake has no context apart from the title. The handshake itself could be a representation of any type of interaction between the two opposing sides. The image of the handshake is therefore stripped of the entirety of symbolic associations of space as a universal platform and a common stage where interactions are dedicated to humankind. What is more, instead of an aspirational celebration, the red hand of the Soviet counterpart appears sinister, with a somewhat hidden symbol of the hammer and sickle, only made visible because of the positioning of the hand. Indeed, the Soviet symbol is revealed only because of the act of handshake; otherwise, it would have remained invisible and hidden, as if it belongs to the palm of a spy. And if the impression is that the Soviet counterpart should not be trusted, there is also the grip of the hand, revealing nothing but four ominous nails. The Soviet hand enveloping the American flag is not only ominous and secretive but also claw-like and deformed, with one of the fingers is missing. Although presented as an image of cooperation, the *Time* magazine cover is instead suggestive of the inherent distrust and violence associated with the other side.



Figure 2: "Space Spectacular," *Time* magazine.

Source: Accessible at <https://magazineproject.org/TIMEvault/1975/1975-07-21/1975-07-21%20page%201.jpg>

This interpretation, however extreme, resonated with many of the criticisms of the joint mission, including warnings that the Soviets would use the space cooperation as an opportunity to appropriate superior American technology.<sup>27</sup> The warning that the United States would only stand to lose from such a collaboration was ubiquitous: coming from dissidents, human rights activists, and political refugees. This is also how the very notion of collaborative engagement was stripped of celebratory associations because cooperation itself was seen as dangerous, costly, and ultimately unnecessary.

From the *Time* magazine cover, it appears that the common sense imaginary of collaboration counterintuitively could not exist outside the context of geopolitical tensions, and it was meaningless without such tensions. Even a showbiz-like spectacle was insufficient to bridge the suspicions and mistrust. This was because politically and ideologically the two countries were understood to be so far apart that they could not even muster a common vision for what the cosmic space and the universe beyond planet Earth would look like. Stripped of the evocative imaginary of space, science, and discovery, the cover can be seen as a warning about the challenges of cooperation with the Soviet Union. Ironically bringing visibility to cooperation in the hopes that it would inspire joint action and renewed commitment to finding solutions to challenging global problems seems to have had exactly the opposite effect: in the popular imaginary in the United States, it reaffirmed the suspicions and distrust of the Soviets' intentions.

## The Space Race Spectacle

Certainly, it could be argued that the handshake image on the *Time* cover is a reflection of a growing political opposition to space collaboration, especially in light of the exorbitant costs and general distrust of the Soviets. But

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27. "Space Spectacular," *Time*, July 1975, <https://magazineproject.org/TIMEvault/1975/1975-07-21g>.

the image also suggests there is something in the imaginary of collaboration itself that is inadequate. In particular, it doesn't appear as if the handshake (as a symbol of collaboration) will lead to anything. Unlike Soviet representations of a comical squeeze of the very cause of confrontation, the handshake image—set against a dark, ominous background—is hardly evocative, impossible to associate with the affective excitement of joint discovery or achievement of improbable goals.

The latter point becomes even more apparent when the handshake cover is compared with another *Time* magazine cover, known as the “Race for the Moon” (fig. 3).

Set in much lighter tones, featuring an unreservedly fantastical rendering of American and Soviet astronauts running toward the Moon, the cover immediately generates a sense of excitement and expectation. There is brightness and energy to the image coming from the two astronauts running toward the moon and the blue background suggestive of the infinity of the universe yet to be discovered. The image also brings excitement because the two figures are so close in their race, like two athletes making a final push toward the finish line. In a final jostle to victory, it is also very much apparent that the American astronaut is about to reach the Moon first.

The contrast between the two *Time* magazine covers, “Space Spectacular” and “Race for the Moon,” suggests that the very rendering of space is not informed by the notion of cosmic universe itself but instead exists as part of a larger ideological framework. In the context of the Cold War, this framework positions competition as a meaningful, inspiring, and exciting undertaking. Simultaneously, it reduces cooperation to untold pathways to treachery and deceit. Whereas cooperation appears ominous and leaves the American counterpart vulnerable and unprepared, the image of competition suggests assurance and unlimited ability. According to this image, no one has the capacity to hold and restrict the American running toward the ultimate goal—the conquest of the Moon. This therefore adds to the standard political and economic legitimization of competition as the only way to maintain superiority, independence, freedom, and a clear state of mind. The





Figure 3: "Race for the Moon," *Time* magazine.

Source: Accessible at <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19681206,00.html>

image creates a sense that it is only through unhindered competition that new frontiers and the universe could be discovered.

Competition and ideology also feature prominently on the Soviet *Krokodil* covers, albeit with different messaging. Simply stated, because the Soviets were the first to successfully launch into space, the covers reflected the technological and political supremacy of the Soviet Union in space. The message was clear: there is no competition because the USSR had already won the race. This was because there was but one singular presence in the cosmos—the Soviet spaceship—and there could be no competition when the other was simply missing. Consider, for example, the depiction of the smiling sun with a red flaming crown and a Soviet rocket on top of it (fig. 4).

Here, Soviet supremacy is both universal, covering the entire universe, and superhuman because even celestial objects—the sun and the moon—smile approvingly at the arrival of the Soviet rocket. And, whereas the *Time* cover establishes no relation between the humans and celestial objects, in the *Krokodil* imaginary, the Sun itself is turning red (leaning Communist), adorned with a “new diamond” in its crown.

In terms of timing, the two covers—“Race for the Moon” (1968) and “Sun’s New Diamond in the Crown” (1959)—both precede and orient common sense perceptions in the decade before the joint Apollo-Soyuz mission and the “Handshake in Space” (1975) took place. As such, they are also suggestive of how cooperation became another cause for distrust and fear instead of a venue for celebration and a hope for a collective decision-making. First, despite the proliferation of institutional declarations and United Nations-led agreements, from the very beginning, space was imagined as an indelible part and natural extension of political, ideological, and technological opposition. Advancement of technology and scientific discovery was not for the purposes of exploration of the universe and benefiting the entirety of humanity but was meant to ensure that celestial objects are “enlisted” according to the two countries’ ideological and political preferences.

Second, in framing cosmic space as a new arena for ideological opposition, the common sense terms of engagement were set alongside a



Figure 4: The new diamond in the sun's crown, *Krokodil*.

Source: Accessible at <https://coldwar.unc.edu/2018/07/a-new-diamond/>

spectacular opposition: the conjuring up of a space race that previously only existed in science fiction. In designating space as an arena for an extraordinary, spectacular competition, however, there was little possibility to maintain such a level of excitement in depicting the tedious, mundane details of cooperation. The image of a handshake (the *Time* cover) could never live up to the imaginary of two people running toward the moon. This, unless the handshake itself could be imbued with a sense of foreboding and treachery. Similarly, the image of two spacecraft docking in space and eliminating a caricatured “Cold War” (the *Krokodil* cover) could hardly compare to an image of Soviet supremacy that extends all the way to the Sun.

Third, unlike the premise of the object-centered theory, whereby cooperation takes place on the basis of a collective, common understanding of an issue of universal concern, there is nothing in the American and Soviet images that would suggest a comparable conception of cosmic space, the goals of venturing into space, or the actual deployment of science and technology for the achievement of such goals. On the *Time* magazine covers, the most prominent visual reference to space comes from a partial image of the moon. Beyond that, space looks like a black abyss or a blue sky. The *Krokodil* covers, although slightly more enhanced, also stop short of presenting a meaningful imaginary of space and include caricatures of the sun and the moon. None of these covers provide any sense of what engagement in space might occasion beyond political references to ideological competition, hints of violence, and the excitement of a space race. To this end, there can be no common sense imaginary on what cooperation would entail and why it is even necessary. Beyond the ominous handshake and the two spacecraft seemingly crashing above the Earth, there appears to be very little meaning to cooperation.

The aesthetics of space cooperation rendered in popular magazines during the Cold War create an impression of cooperation as something invisible or, at best, disorienting. As Ahmed argues, disorientation can occur

for a variety of reasons but invariably produces a sense of being lost. To some, such a sense can be exhilarating and trigger reorientation and repositioning of perceptions and understandings. This is also how, on the basis of visual imaginaries, vague, abstract notions of cooperation in space could be discarded for something more “sensible”—such as the excitement of competition. Consequently, unlike the language of the United Nations treaties and political leaders of the time, the imagery associated with space signals how even the vast universe beyond the Earth’s orbit might only acquire meaning through the prism of Washington’s and Moscow’s opposing ideologies and political ambitions.

## The Aesthetics of Climate Cooperation

Although dangerously close, the relationship between the United States and China today does not (yet) carry the full ideological weight of the twentieth-century Cold War. However, the aesthetics of climate cooperation already shares resemblances to the Cold War imaginary of space cooperation, therefore also driving a particular type of common sense orientation toward the issue. Just as with the space program, three features of popular images create an impression of an affective incompatibility between the objective for climate cooperation and underlying differences of how the two countries’ interactions are seen and thought of. As with the space cooperation described above, these features are the missing universal object, emphasis on competition, and a sense of distrust.

In Chinese periodicals, the notion of climate cooperation rarely appears as part of the popular imaginary. In the few instances where cooperation does feature alongside commentaries on climate change, the overall setting is directly reminiscent of competition. This was the case with a now-discontinued publication in *Duo Wei Online News*, where interactions between the United States and China on climate were strictly presented as an ongoing

tussle between the two countries (fig. 5).<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the fact that the *Duo Wei* article and images are now censored and untraceable suggest the very notion of cooperation should not be part of the popular imaginary.

It is nevertheless worth exploring some of the deleted images, as they clearly speak to the dichotomy between cooperation-competition where a common global issue is concerned. One of the images, for example, features

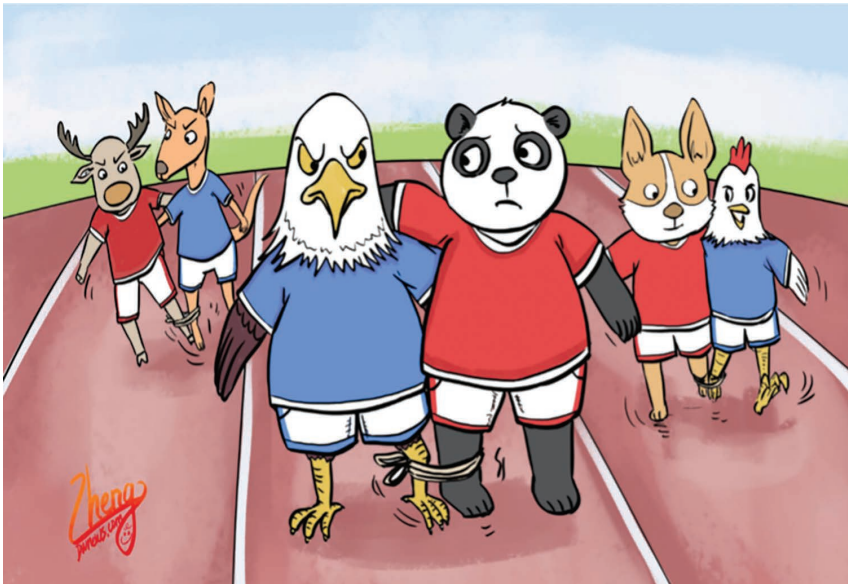


Figure 5: Climate change cooperation, *Duo Wei Online News*. Discontinued. Source: Discontinued. Previously accessible at <https://www.dwnews.com/%E5%85%A8%E7%90%83/60268398/%E8%AE%AE%E4%B8%96%E5%8E%85%E4%B8%BA%E4%BB%80%E4%B9%88%E4%B8%8D%E8%83%BD%E7%94%A8%E7%AB%9E%E4%BA%89%E6%9D%A5%E5%AE%9A%E4%B9%89%E4%B8%AD%E7%BE%8E%E5%85%B3%E7%B3%BB>

28. C. Kejin, “Why U.S. China Relations Can’t Be Defined by Competition,” *Duo Wei Online News*, 2021, <https://www.dwnews.com/%E5%85%A8%E7%90%83/60268398/%E8%AE%AE%E4%B8%96%E5%8E%85%E4%B8%BA%E4%BB%80%E4%B9%88%E4%B8%8D%E8%83%BD%E7%94%A8%E7%AB%9E%E4%BA%89%E6%9D%A5%E5%AE%9A%E4%B9%89%E4%B8%AD%E7%BE%8E%E5%85%B3%E7%B3%BB..>

a depiction of a panda (China) and an eagle (United States) forced to cooperate in order to be part of a competitive event. Judging from the facial expressions and postures, the cooperation arrangement between the two—each participant's leg tied onto the leg of the other—is not going smoothly. Instead of excitement and determination to charge ahead, the two participants appear stuck on how to even perform in unison and share a common space. Each looks suspiciously at the other, considering perhaps how to untie the rope that binds them and run away. Their mutual discomfort is also visible in the awkward hug—the panda is on the verge of twisting its arm while attempting to stay close to the eagle and the eagle is quite uncomfortable with the forced embrace. The image is both a reminder and a stark contrast with the aforementioned “Race for the Moon.” In the *Times* depiction, each participant is singularly engaged in the goal of reaching the moon and, as such, determined and focused on the bigger objective at hand. In the *Duo Wei* version, framing cooperation as a necessary part of engagement exposes the limited possibility for achieving anything at all. The two sides are in a state of limbo, stuck between nonconfrontation and noncooperation.<sup>29</sup>

Even the notion of a common global problem that necessitates cooperation would not suffice. In a setting reminiscent of the missing imaginary of universal cosmic space, the panda and eagle image provides no understanding of climate, the universality of the issue, or what exactly cooperation on climate might entail. The conundrum is made even more explicit in China's official news outlet, *Global Times*, where climate cooperation, and not even climate itself, is just another piece on a chess board (fig. 6).<sup>30</sup>

Here, the two countries' have their own “Climate Cooperation” bishop, and the US bishop is already eliminated. The explicit suggestion is that

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29. A direct allusion to Anthony Blinken's assertion that the US relationship with China “will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be.” See “A Foreign Policy for the American People,” US Department of State, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>.

30. “China Deserves Praise for Difficult Climate Pledges,” *Global Times*, November 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1237936.shtml>.

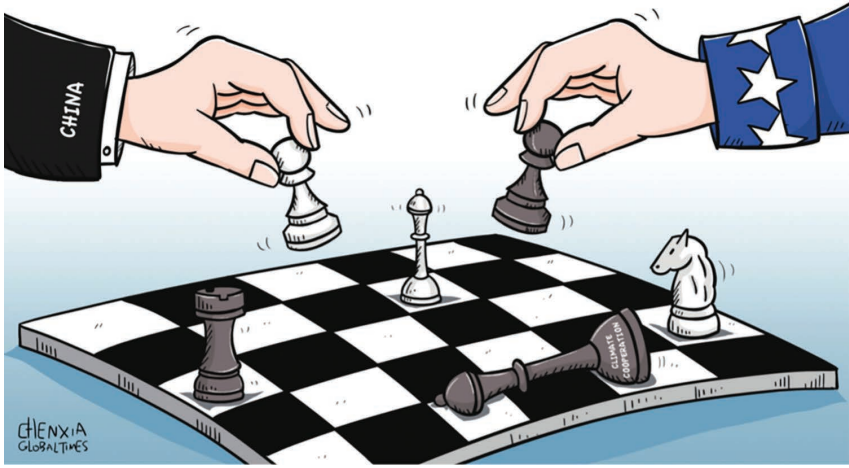


Figure 6: Climate chess, *Global Times*.

Source: Accessible at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1237936.shtml>

there was never much climate cooperation on Washington’s agenda—the bishop has fallen on its own, without any specific move necessary for it to be eliminated. At the same time, the Chinese and American players appear to contend over the fate of the white bishop (i.e., the “Climate Cooperation” piece that Beijing holds). Implicit in the gesture is a sense that the United States is now trying to undermine the climate agenda China might have in place. Even for this reason alone, Washington’s agenda on climate is not to be trusted. As was the case with space exploration, a common sense perception of climate cooperation remains fixated on the political opposition and discrepancies between the two countries rather than the actual mechanics of the issue itself. There seems to be a vicious cycle: climate change, and the various interpretations of its meaning, does not exist until the United States and China find a meaningful way to engage collectively. Yet, a collective engagement on something that remains largely undefined is bound to have limited legitimacy or social approval. This impression is further reaffirmed by the chess board setup: with both kings missing, the



entire undertaking appears to be a sham. Aligned with the Chinese political leaders' continued insistence that climate cooperation cannot be viewed separately from the overall relationship between the two countries,<sup>31</sup> the image reasserts a common sense impression that the game of cooperation cannot be played with only some pieces, pretending that others are somehow irrelevant to the setup.

The theme of visibility-invisibility, presences-absences, is also central to the *Time* magazine "Last Call" rendering of climate change (fig. 7).

The cover reflects the bizarre configuration during the COP26 climate meeting in Glasgow where many world leaders and delegates were unable to attend in person due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The "Last Call" reference itself could be interpreted in multiple ways. For example, in a since-deleted "Last Call for Climate" tweet, *Time* magazine staffers suggested the Glasgow event was the last opportunity to commit to meaningful joint action to prevent climate change. However, "last call" could also be understood as an attempt to summon those who are yet to come to the hallways of negotiation and a prompt that they reaffirm their commitment to united action. Such a call is especially directed toward the missing Chinese leader, Xi Jinping. His name placard is placed in between the respective leaders of the United States and the European Union, Joe Biden and Ursula von der Leyen, who are just seen waiting. Featured at the very front, the latter seem to be in charge of the "last call." They are the leading proponents (along with activist Greta Thunberg, the president of Nigeria, and the prime minister of India) of the need for collective action. Seemingly, those who are missing, who fail to join in global climate cooperation efforts, are the ones who are still bent on competition while the rest of the world is on the verge of burning, drowning, and freezing—all at the same time. The image therefore is suggestive of the failure of the Chinese side to show up at the most

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31. J. Shi, "Climate Crisis: China's All-or-Nothing Stand on Talks Leaves John Kerry Cornered," *South China Morning Post*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3147854/climate-crisis-chinas-all-or-nothing-stand-talks-leaves-john>.



Figure 7: “Last call,” *Time* magazine.

Source: Accessible at <https://time.com/6109403/cop26-summit-agenda>

critical juncture of time and place. The “last call” is the last opportunity for cooperation, where the entire world is waiting for China to deliver on its alleged commitment. The treachery and unmet expectations are alluded to, both visually (the missing presence) and literally (last call—last supper).

It is worth noting, however, that unlike other depictions, the “Last Call” image presents a unique, complex imaginary of climate change. In a rare depiction of its complexity, climate change is rendered not as one singular phenomenon, or an image of a green Earth, but as a combination of cataclysmic events happening all at once. On the cover, some of the assembly chairs are on fire, referencing the devastating fires across many parts of the world. At the same time, at the other end of the assembly hall, the chairs are covered in deep snow. Even Biden and von der Leyen are not spared: they appear to be standing in a space that is simultaneously in danger of flooding and desertification.

Certainly, extreme weather events are considered to be one of the main effects of climate change, yet this cataclysmic background can be also deceiving. As many climate deniers might argue, fires and draughts are just normal weather fluctuations, nothing extraordinary in the overall pattern of a constantly changing global environment. As a typical saying in climate change denial goes, “the climate always changes.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Biden and von der Leyen themselves appear oblivious to the cataclysmic environment surrounding them: either because they are used to it or because they do not want to acknowledge the severity and catastrophic impact of weather fluctuations. Indeed, a more cynical interpretation of the image would be that world leaders, irrespective of whether they are present or absent from an event, remain impervious and unfazed by the apocalyptic conditions unfolding right in front of them. Their serene faces suggest a perfect disconnect from the cataclysmic combination of snow, rain, fire, and wind surrounding them. Instead, they sit calmly, hands or legs crossed, staring at a void ahead, expectantly waiting.

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32. See, for example, Tucker Carlson’s climate debates, such as “Tucker vs. Bill Nye the Science Guy,” Fox News, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qN5L2q6hfWo>.

Such interpretation leaves an impression that whereas the world is on the verge of falling apart, major political leaders can only sit and wait in oblivion. As such, the political message concerning the missing Chinese leader could also be lost in the havoc of the cataclysmic surroundings and general inaction of those present. Getting one more person to sit on a chair alongside Biden and von der Leyen is hardly *the* solution to the apocalypse enveloping the image. Ultimately, it remains unclear what the world leaders are meant to do with respect to the dramatic weather conditions and, in particular, how cooperation is linked to these extreme events. Similar to the issue of space exploration, there is nothing in the imagery on climate change that points to the value of cooperation.

## Conclusion

What does cooperation between rival superpowers look like? Do global issues have the capacity to rise above the geopolitics of the day and trigger alignment between rival powers? This article argued that the Cold War joint space exploration program between the United States and the USSR provides a lesson on the limits of cooperation. These limits, I posited, are not only a matter of power preferences, institutional differences, material disincentives, or even a consequence of a tendency for free-riding. Rather, they are also the result of incompatible common sense perceptions. Such perceptions are formulated and driven by overarching mistrust and fear of the strategic motivations and hidden purposes of the other side. Cooperation, even if institutionally viable, is constrained due to a lack of popular endorsement and legitimacy.

To explore how common sense perceptions structure a sense of legitimacy, the article turned to the politics of aesthetics and interrogated the visual renderings of space interactions in the United States and the USSR. Using a phenomenological approach and drawing on images widely circulated in popular magazines, I showed how the imaginary of cooperation

itself can become the source of fear and distrust. Images of a handshake or an arm across the shoulder do not necessarily signal agreement and trust; instead, they can become the source of disorientation, further contributing to inherent predisposition to shun cooperation. This is also how a viable space collaboration remained out of public sight: this even though it continued for many decades, and well beyond the collapse of the USSR.

As political differences and sense of ideological incompatibility envelop global capitals today, the Cold War imaginary of the space program can serve as both critique and inspiration for present day attempts at cooperation on global issues such as climate change. Four insights from the aesthetics of cooperation suggest a good starting point in heeding the lessons of the past.

First, despite the existence of a global framework and considerable political support at the highest level of government, the Cold War imaginary suggests there is no common understanding and therefore no legitimate grounds for cooperation on a universal issue. Relatedly, the notion that a universal issue would inspire a common approach “beyond politics” does not hold. The problem is not simply in the mechanics of finding a common approach. It is also in agreeing on the nature of universals and their validity.<sup>33</sup> Turning to the politics of aesthetics is one way of showing that there is no common sense understanding of universals such as “space” or “climate change.” Visual renderings of space across different popular magazines revealed divergent conceptualizations of universality and what an engagement with a “universal” issue might entail. It is notable, for example, that images of cooperation in space did not reference joint research or collaborative development of technology (as was actually the case). Instead, the popular imaginary of cooperation in space was limited to either a vision about the end of the Cold War or a handshake. At the same time, the entire process of technological cooperation and attempts to make the two programs interoperable. Today, climate change is similarly visualized differently

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33. See also A. L. Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

by different sides, with representations ranging from a chessboard juggle to an apocalyptic world with multiple weather calamities happening all at once.

Second, and related, in a world of extreme geopolitical tensions and bipolarity, it appears unrealistic to expect cooperation between hostile superpowers to resolve a widespread sense of animosity and distrust. At the very height of space cooperation, at the moment of a spectacular joint mission, the overarching common sense understanding was that cooperation was a costly and unnecessary enterprise that would only benefit and bring prestige to the enemy. There was nothing inherent in the nature of space itself that made it more conducive to collaborative action. To the contrary, the common sense understanding of how humans relate to space remained vastly different and collaboration could not be legitimized because of entirely different aspirations associated with space.

Third, while competition is not seen as conducive to a peaceful relationship, the space programs and the joint attempts at expanding technical capabilities and reaching the moon point to a phenomenon of “competitive cooperation.” While visibly, in the public space, the two sides were seen as competing against each other, the competition itself pushed both countries to dedicate the resources, advance training opportunities, and supply the necessary conditions for technological innovation. All of this was possible because there was another side to partake in the competition and keep the race going. At the same time, the competition was justified and legitimated as an assertion of power and technological superiority. One lesson for climate change engagement could therefore be that it is competition, rather than cooperation, that might inspire the necessary level of innovation and technological breakthroughs needed to prevent a climate catastrophe.

A final lesson of Cold War cooperation relates to the overarching power of cognition and orientation of common sense understandings. At times of extreme ideological competition, there is an expectation to see deception and duplicity irrespective of government agendas, institutional arrangements, and celebratory media portrayals. Furthermore, in a setting

of extreme politicization and ideological competition, the public thirst for spectacular excitement comes not from a dubious handshake symbolizing cooperation but from the imagery of fantastic, superhuman competition. As such, suggesting a cooperative engagement around something nebulous and under-defined, such as space exploration, only extends the sense of affective dissonance and distrust. In a world edging closely to a new bipolar hostility, the Cold War lesson on cooperation is a warning on the power of affective disorientation that has the ability to distort objectives, undermine legitimacy, erode trust, and erase the very imaginary of collective action. In a manner similar to the erasure of the collective memory of space cooperation during the Cold War, today there appears to be little ground left on which an imaginary of climate cooperation might prevail over the overwhelming thrust toward competition.

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