

Star Trek and International Relations

Written by Amit Gupta

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AMIT GUPTA, JUN 2 2013

Warning: This article contains spoilers related to Star Trek Into Darkness.

There have been three distinct phases in the Star Trek franchise: classic Trek, *The Original Series* plus six movies with the inimitable William Shatner; *The Next Generation* and its spin offs like *Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager*, plus the four movies that followed; and the twenty-first century rebooting of the franchise with an almost juvenile Kirk and Spock (the shorter-lived series *Enterprise* is left out since it never quite achieved the cult following the other franchises did). Trek in all its versions has long fascinated political scientists since it so clearly represents some of the contending themes in International Relations. What I intend to do in this brief article is examine the evolution of international relations themes in Star Trek and make the argument that the reboot of the franchise has taken it back to its original roots in terms of describing the interactions in the interstellar (international) system.

The Original Star Trek

Classic Star Trek was very much a product of its times in that it took on the liberal themes that were dominating American society in the 1960s but also constructed the interstellar system along Cold War lines. Thus racism, feminism, the nuclear arms race, and the struggle between democracy and totalitarianism were all part of classic Trek's discourse and Captain Kirk and his crew frequently ignored the prime directive of nonparticipant observation to positively meddle in the affairs of other worlds. This was just a popular reflection of a post-Second World War American foreign policy that had actively sought to reshape societies through the Marshall Plan in Europe and the post-war reconstruction of Japan.

The United Federation of Planets, which represented the US on the show, went around the universe righting social injustice—what International Relations scholars would call a Wilsonian boots on the ground approach—but the Federation (or state) itself remained the classic black box of realist theory with no real discussion of what went on within it. In classic Trek, until the sixth movie—*The Undiscovered Country* (1991)—the Federation was seen as peaceful, harmonious, and just, while the international/interstellar system consisted of hostile empires with few redeeming features. Thus, the Federation, as represented by the crew of the *Enterprise*, was presented as one where human beings had resolved their racial, ethnic, cultural, and economic differences and become an evolved group of human beings (one may suggest that this is what made the original Trek so far ahead of its time and perhaps set the standards for future television programming in terms of characterization of different ethno-racial groups). Spock, Sulu, Chekov, and Uhura all represented this futuristic vision of Star Trek's creator Eugene Wesley Roddenberry.

In contrast, in the international system, which reflected the emerging Tripolarity of the 1960s, the battle lines were clearly drawn between the democratic liberal-internationalist Federation (which internally had a world government) and the darker, less transparent, totalitarian empires of the Klingons (USSR) and Romulus (China). With the Vulcans (Japan) as the once extremely violent cousins of the Romulans who had become pacifists. The interstellar system reflected Realist theory and Cold War politics since the system was a self-help one, spheres of influence had been carved out for each empire, and a delicate systemic peace was maintained by the judicious use of force and balancing off other powers. In fact the great powers created their own buffer area—the neutral zone—to avoid large scale hostilities from breaking out.

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Moreover, the entire conflict was painted in Cold War terms with one side having ideological purity and the moral high ground while the other empires were stereotypically evil. Thus while the Klingons and the Romulans used cloaking devices to make their ships invisible, the Federation never did even though Captain Kirk did steal the device from the Romulans. As Gary J. Schaub of the University of Copenhagen points out, the Federation could not have a cloaking device because it would have been a “Pearl Harbor in reverse,” something that U.S. foreign policy could never permit.[1] In fact, it took until *The Undiscovered Country* for the dark underbelly of Federation to be revealed with a set of hawks seeking to trigger a conflict with the Klingon Empire.

Further, even though classic Trek’s mission of scientific discovery was couched in anthropological terms of non-participant observation, Captain Kirk and the crew of the Enterprise frequently disregarded the directive to set right wrongs in society—very much reminiscent of the US in post-war Germany, Japan, and South Korea. Modern Japan’s constitution, land reforms, and pacifist orientation were all due to the American occupation of Japan and a purposeful reshaping of that society.

The Next Generation and Spin-Offs

By the time of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* debuted in 1987 not only had the international system changed but so too had political science and the ways of looking at the state. Political Science had started to move into the grey area between comparative politics and international relations to look for internal causes like strategic culture to explain a country’s foreign policy behavior.

Internationally, détente and the subsequent renewal of the Cold War had been replaced by Gorbachev and Reagan’s walk in the woods in Reykjavik, the advent of Glasnost and Perestroika, and a Triple Zero initiative that took away an entire series of tactical and shorter range missiles in Europe.

Additionally, the US itself was less certain of its own standing and moral authority in world affairs: Vietnam, Watergate, and Iran Contra had all led to lesser acceptance of American institutions and policymakers (something that was reversed after the first Gulf war and then cemented by the events of 9/11). This combination of an international reconciliation that ended in Yoshihiro Francis Fukuyama’s famous contention that we had reached the end of history coupled with crisis within the American political system, led to a new type of Trek. Realism with its interstate conflicts and the Federation as a black box was out. Instead, the Federation had become, at least in terms of its foreign policy, more liberal-internationalist, recognizing that people were inherently good while governments were capable of violence and conflict. This was perhaps best brought out in the episodes about Spock’s attempts to reunify Romulus and Vulcan (in the two part storyline Unification). Sections of the Romulan population wanted reunification and a better future while members of the Romulan high council saw this as an opportunity to use the naiveté of Spock to launch a sneak attack on Vulcan.

Even more memorable and new enemies like the Borg and Species 8472 could be reasoned with to reach peaceful accommodations. The Borg collective is infected with human emotions in *The Next Generation* via the character Hugh; and on *Voyager*, the character 7 of 9 moves from being part of the collective to a rational yet emotional individual. In the case of Species 8472, what could have been a long drawn out conflict becomes a reasoned negotiation between two conflicting powers and, instead, a peaceful compromise is reached—with everybody’s favorite Martian, Ray Walston, being brought in to play the leader of Species 8472.

The Next Generation took classic Trek’s approach to societal and international issues to explore the problems of the 1990s with discussions of homosexuality, euthanasia, and rape now coming to the fore. And, it also introduced other memorable races to account for different perceptions of international affairs. The Cardassians and the Bajorans were viewed either as the Nazis and the Jews or the Israelis and the Palestinians depending on how the viewer read these relationships. Similarly, the Ferengi could either have been the stereotypical Middle-Eastern trader or a metaphor for the emerging intergalactic class of businessmen for whom profit overrode all other motives. *The Next Generation* in other words was foreseeing the advent of a globalized world that resulted from the end of the Cold War and the flattening of the international system.

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What summed up the shift towards globalization was the birth of the show *Deep Space Nine*. The action was initially set aboard a space station which led critics to call it the cruise ship of science fiction. But as the show progressed, it exhibited a post-Cold War international system. The enemies were no longer great powers but, instead, a coalition of forces called the Dominion. Non-state actors were prominent in the system and part of the ongoing plot line was reminiscent of nation building in the 1990s with the Bajorans coming to terms with their new status as an independent planet.

Yet, by the late 1990s Star Trek was showing signs of fatigue on television. Too many versions of the franchise had led to the impact of the show being diluted as well as a lack of truly compelling characters and plot lines. *Deep Space Nine*, in fact, “jumped the shark” when it did a back to the future episode by linking the DS9 crew into the classic Trek episode, ‘The Trouble with Tribbles’. Not surprisingly, the Trek franchise was pulled from movies and while *Enterprise* continued it never got the fan following that its predecessors did. It took until 2009 for the next big venture of Trek onto the big screen.

The Re-imagined Trek

The new Star Trek explored the origins of Kirk and Spock in a way that had become a sure fire Hollywood formula for success with the emergence in the new millennium of several highly profitable superhero origins movies like Spiderman, Batman, the X-Men, and Iron Man. In keeping with the times, the emphasis in both the first Star Trek reboot and the new movie, *Star Trek Into Darkness*, has been on rogue terrorist groups rather than on nation states or empires thus reflecting the changing times in the international system. In the first movie Nero, a survivor of the explosion that destroys Romulus, wages a war with a small group of renegades against the Federation. In *Into Darkness*, J.J. Abrams resurrects Khan from classic Trek as a product of Eugenics and makes him into a first class terrorist. The twist in the tale being that once again the seamy side of the Federation is revealed because it is not an innocent victim of terror but instead at least partly responsible for making Khan into a terrorist. Internal factors drive foreign policy actions.

Political correctness and the logical trap of liberal-internationalism may have compromised the story line in Trek during The Next Generation years and hampered the franchise’s creative potential. The new Trek, even though it focuses on non-state actors, has harkened back to the era of Cold War politics and this may actually allow the development of story lines that have a rich political narrative. Romulus and Vulcan may have been destroyed but the Klingons are alive, well, and hostile. The Borg are yet to be discovered, and there are bound to be conflicts with Species 8472.

Star Trek’s heydays perhaps were when it reflected interstellar conflict between empires/nation states. The new Trek has allowed us to go back and retrace such conflicts and thus relive some of the best moments of the show. Let us face facts—Realism, as the late Kenneth Waltz would have told us, makes for elegant theory but in terms of science fiction also helps create some amazing plot lines. You will be assimilated G. John Ikenberry!

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[1] Interview with Gary J. Schaub, Associate Professor, University of Copenhagen, April 17, 2013, Montgomery, Alabama.

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