

James Bond: The sum of our geopolitical fears

From the Cold War to bacteriological weaponry, the super-spy film franchise has over almost six decades adapted to the dominant anxieties of the times.

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For *The Straits Times*

"I think you're a sexist, misogynist dinosaur, a relic of the Cold War..." These were the words with which M, the head of the British Secret Intelligence Service, also known as MI6, welcomed one of his agents in 1995.

The movie was *GoldenEye*. M was a woman, and the agent was James Bond who, along with many of us, seemed to agree with his boss. "Point taken," he replied.

While glamorous locations, fast cars, and dry Martinis remain constant features of the James Bond franchise, much has indeed changed since the opening adventure of Bond in 1962.

Women's characters, in particular, have evolved dramatically, moving away from the horribly sexist names of Pussy Galore and Chew Mee, to the new 007 agent Nomi, played by Lashana Lynch in the latest production of the franchise, *No Time To Die*, which is the 25th official Bond film.

How much Bond has adapted to today's social mores remains open to debate. However, there is an often-overlooked evolution that has contributed to the enormous success of the series over almost six decades: its representation of our innermost geopolitical fears.

Nuclear annihilation, terrorism, organised crime, bacteriological

warfare, economic crises, environmental devastation: the list of global threats in the Bond world is long.

The franchise, born in the ideological certainty of a bipolar world, has been able to adapt to the dominant anxieties of the times.

In the novels, penned in the 1950s by Ian Fleming, himself a former agent in the British naval intelligence, Bond is in charge of defending the "free world" from the growing ideological and military threat of the Soviet Union.

No reference is made to the fading British Empire or emerging American dominance, nor to the Anglo-American tensions of those years due to the Suez crisis in 1956 and the defections to the Soviet Union of the British spies Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, and Kim Philby, members of the so-called Cambridge Spy Ring. Despite the fictional British dominance, the plots were very much grounded in the fears of the broader Western world of those days.

In *Thunderball*, published in 1961, one year before the Cuban missile crisis, a commander of a US nuclear submarine fears that "any of these little sandy cays" in the Caribbean "could hold the whole of the United States to ransom" with "one of my missiles trained on Miami". It was the year when US President John F. Kennedy included *From Russia With Love*, published in 1957, among his top 10 favourite books, making Fleming a bestselling author in the US.

In 1985, when president Ronald Reagan and the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev began to hold their "summit" meetings in the real world, Bond in *A View To A*



Daniel Craig ramping it up as James Bond in *No Time To Die*. How much Bond has adapted to today's social mores remains open to debate, but the writer says there is an often-overlooked evolution that has contributed to the enormous success of the series over almost six decades: its representation of our innermost geopolitical fears. PHOTO: UIP

TAKING ON TOP THREATS

When Bond became a celluloid character in 1962, the villain in the first film, *Dr No*, was dangerously provoking nuclear annihilation; it kicked off the trend of including the top threats of the day in the movie plots.

Every actor who played Bond came with not only a different style, but also operated in a different geopolitical environment.

Sean Connery (and George Lazenby, for that matter) was very much rooted in the Cold War. Indeed, it seems that even the Soviets were interested in Bond movies. Oleg Gordievsky, the former head of the KGB station in London who eventually defected in 1985, claimed in a BBC Radio show that the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party watched Bond films, and the KGB asked him to obtain the gadgets used by Bond.

As the world was transforming in the early 1970s, Roger Moore introduced not only more humour, but also a better relationship with the Russians. He works with a KGB agent, played by the model Barbara Bach in *The Spy Who Loved Me* in 1977, during the years of US-USSR détente.

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Kill receives the Order of Lenin, the highest decoration bestowed by the Soviet Union.

Many predicted the end of the franchise, as the world was moving away from the confrontation of the Cold War and was entering an age of different concerns. But, with Timothy Dalton and Pierce Brosnan, Bond became the guardian of a new world exposed to transnational threats.

Dalton deals with drug trafficking in his two contributions to the series, *The Living Daylights* (1987) and *Licence To Kill* (1989), while Brosnan fights financial criminals in *GoldenEye* (1995), techno-terrorists and media moguls who want to provoke a war in the South China Sea in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), an evil oil tycoon in *The World Is Not Enough* (1999), and a deranged North Korean in *Die Another Day* (2002), right when US president George W. Bush included the country in the "axis of evil" together with Iran and Iraq.

POST 9/11 BOND

Up till that period, the geopolitics of Bond remained primarily painted in black and white. There is no trace of the murkiness of international affairs and the intelligence underworld, so well captured by the works of spy thriller writers Eric Ambler, Len Deighton or John le Carré. He always acts cleanly; he faces no

moral dilemmas.

Enter Daniel Craig, the post-9/11 Bond. He operates in the age of ambiguity, in which good and bad are not ideologically defined and clear-cut. He seems to be the perfect interpreter of what the French political scientist Dominique Moisi called the "geopolitics of emotions" of the 21st century.

As fear, humiliation and frustrated hopes encourage the conflicts of the new century, Craig develops a character that appears invincible, but is humanly vulnerable, motivated by a spectrum of emotions unseen so far in the series.

In the age of global terrorism, CIA extraordinary rendition, and the horrors of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, betrayal and double play, together with the dark side of carrying a licence to kill, feature prominently in the Craig movies. He kills with no remorse in *Casino Royale* (2006), while facing a global terrorist connected with African rebels and organised crime.

His boss' bodyguard almost kills him in *Quantum Of Solace* (2008), when he saves the world from a plot to control the price of fresh water. In *Skyfall* (2012), his nemesis is nothing less than a former colleague, particularly apt in the use of cyber-terrorism.

In *Spectre* (2015), his arch-nemesis Ernst Stavro Blofeld is revealed to be Bond's foster brother, who is fed intelligence

data by a corrupted high-ranking British spy with a sinister plot of global surveillance that reminds us of a world order in which invasive global snooping is the new normal.

Bond's character has more in common with the troubled universe of *The Avengers*, with superheroes that commit ethically questionable acts, fight each other, and end up actually dying in some cases, rather than the reassuring, "always winning clarity" of Connery's world.

In the latest entry of the series, *No Time To Die*, which was filmed before the global pandemic, Bond has to stop a global terrorist from using a bacteriological weapon that adapts to individual DNA. It happens that this virus is stolen from a secret lab in the middle of London, under the supervision of M, Bond's boss. Covid-19 was not developed by a secret governmental project, but the connection with our time's innermost fears is too close for comfort.

As the series continues its uninterrupted success into the second decade of the 21st century, some may wonder where China is in all this. The movies steer away from what is arguably the most pressing contemporary geopolitical challenge, the US-China rivalry.

Through the years, Bond villains were primarily independent plutocrats of different ethnicities or members of the nefarious private transnational criminal organisation *Spectre*, which stands for The Special Executive for Counterintelligence, Terrorism, Revenge and Extortion.

While many villains through the years have been of various nationalities, the recent movies have also included many deranged British and American spies.

Avoiding the geopolitical confrontation of the day makes the stories more free-floating politically. Like Singapore and many other countries in the region and around the world, the producers prefer not to take sides.

Arguably, this is another geopolitical lesson from Bond. If you are a successful global franchise, you need everyone to contribute to your prosperity. But, it is also a reflection of the dominant fears of everyday humanity, more preoccupied by cybercrime, and natural and biological disasters than US-China trade disputes.

A bold move would be to see Bond collaborating with Chinese intelligence to solve common challenges. After all, in the past, we have seen him working with the KGB, the Taliban and the Chinese agent Wai Lin, played by Michelle Yeoh, in *Tomorrow Never Dies*. That was 1997. Sadly, today this might be too fictional even for James Bond.

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