On Her Majesty's Secret Service

Ever since *Dr No* hit our screens in 1962, James Bond has been single-handedly saving the world from crazed megalomaniacs hell-bent on world domination. Blofeld, Scaramanga, Stromberg, Drax – they all dreamt up fiendish plans that, although far-fetched in their objectives, were relevant to contemporary issues. With the imminent release of the 20th film in the series, *Die Another Day*, Klaus Dodds examines how the Bond films have moved with the times, reflecting, and sometimes predicting, real-life geopolitics.
You Only Live Twice (1967)

One of the most commonly held fears during the Cold War era was that something would trigger a nuclear exchange between the USSR and USA. When the shadowy criminal organisation SPECTRE tries to provide such a trigger by sabotaging US and Soviet space flights from its base on a small volcanic island off the Japanese coast, it's up to Bond to save the world.

Guns, Gadjets, Glamorous Women — these are the elements of James Bond films with which we're all familiar. But geography and geopolitics? Surprising as it may sound, if you look beneath the glossy exterior of flash cars, witty quips and sharp suits, you'll discover that as often as not, the films are in tune with, and sometimes even pre-empt, the real-life international political landscape of their time.

The new Bond film, Die Another Day, opens with a spectacular high-speed hovercraft chase through the demilitarised zone between North and South Korea as an attempted infiltration of the North is compromised. This choice of setting is opportune given US President George W. Bush's recent declaration that North Korea lay alongside Iran and Iraq in an "axis of evil". So how have the Bond films continually managed to combine a very British sense of humour with geopolitical prescience and healthy box-office receipts?

When Ian Fleming wrote about James Bond for the first time in the mid-1950s, the enemy was represented by a Soviet intelligence organisation called SMERSH. This seemed highly realistic given that Britain's secret intelligence services were involved in covert battles with the Soviet KGB in Europe and elsewhere. However, the film producers, Eon Productions and United Artists,
realised that if Bond and his associates, such as the CIA's Felix Leiter, were to retain their popularity then the films would have to move with the times. Thus, Bond's on-screen adversaries have been constantly adjusted and updated to reflect Cold War periods of direct confrontation (1947–63 and 1979–85) and relative détente (1963–79).

For many Britons, the James Bond film was part and parcel of an enjoyable Christmas Day television routine. Broadcast directly after the Queen's speech at 3.15pm, it was perfect viewing fare following a large lunch and a few celebratory drinks. The humour was cheesy, the gadgets were implausible and the action was invariably spectacular. And regardless of the mission, 007 always came out on top.

Representing a rather appealing interpretation of Englishness, Bond was suave, amusing, attractive and lion-hearted. At the same time, his patter was sufficiently cosmopolitan to allow international audiences to appreciate the sexual innuendo and witty off-the-cuff retorts. It has been estimated that at least a quarter of the world's population has seen a Bond film, either on television, video, DVD or at the cinema.
Bond was not only fun to watch, he also provided welcome relief to those who lamented Britain's decline as a world force. In the world of 007, Britain remained a great power undiminished by the formal dissolution of the British Empire and near financial ruin following the Second World War. Likewise, Britain's eclipse by the USA and Soviet Union was effectively suspended. The theme song from *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977) contends, "Nobody does it better", even if it isn't clear by the end of the film whether the reference is to Bond or Britain. Regardless of the medium, British audiences could, while watching the film, forget the cruel jibes that Britain was the "sick man of Europe".

Bond stood up to the Americans, but more importantly he ensured that we could all sleep soundly, safe in the knowledge that Britain's enemies were being kept at bay. He was the perfect imperial fantasy, managing to glide across international boundaries with the minimum of fuss. Ever since his first screen appearance in the Caribbean-based *Dr No* (1962), Bond travelled to places that most Britons, until comparatively recently, would never have been able to visit, such as Afghanistan, Brazil, Russia and Turkey.

As a consequence, Bond is always topical, relevant and at times rather surprising. Released in 1962, the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis, *Dr No* set the standard. Having
been dispatched to Jamaica to investigate the mysterious death of another British agent, Bond uncovers a fiendish plot to interfere with US rocket testing in Florida. Expecting to discover that his adversaries are Soviet or Chinese, Bond is surprised to learn that a sinister criminal organisation calling itself SPECTRE (Special Executive for Counter-Intelligence, Terrorism, Revenge and Extortion) is responsible. Its mysterious leader, Dr No, tells Bond that “east and west are just points on the compass”, and that the non-aligned SPECTRE is primarily concerned with the pursuit of global power and wealth. Bond completes his mission by ensuring the destruction of Dr No and the SPECTRE operations centre at the fictitious Crab Key, in the process single-handedly averting a third world war.

The plots and permutations of the Bond series continued as the Cold War entered a new phase of relative détente in the 1970s. As the threat posed by the Soviet Union appeared to recede, Bond began tackling new dangers. In *Live and Let Die* (1973), for example, he stops a drug cartel flooding the USA with cheap heroin grown in the Caribbean. Indeed, in *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977), Bond cooperates closely with a female Soviet counterpart (Agent Triple X) in order to prevent a crazed plutocrat (Stromberg) from destroying the world. During the film, the head of Soviet Intelligence announces that a new era of Anglo-Soviet cooperation had been initiated, which appeared entirely plausible, given the real-life thawing of relations at the time.

The Bond films were in effect a successful form of cultural propaganda reflecting the Manichean politics of the Cold War. The struggle between West and East was as much a war of words as it was a military or political confrontation. You were either with us or with ‘the evil empire’ of the Soviets, as then-President Ronald Reagan used to explain in the 1980s. In Europe, the possibility of nuclear annihilation was a very real threat to citizens living on either side of the Berlin Wall. The USA
The World Is Not Enough (1999)

Oil, international terrorism and nuclear weapons - it doesn't get much more topical than this. The petroleum reserves in the Caspian Sea region are some of the largest outside the Middle East and 007 is sent to protect a new pipeline bringing Caspian oil to the West against a terrorist threat. On the day before this film was released, Bill Clinton presided over the signing of a new Caspian Sea oil scheme in Istanbul.

and Soviets stationed nuclear weapons at bases scattered across the continent and both were funding extensive espionage programmes. Soviet agents bugged British and US installations and embassies, and the West returned the compliment.

All governments were thus obsessed with the danger of subversion and used the threat of the other side to justify restrictions on freedom of movement and the press. It isn't too far-fetched to suggest that the British and US governments could even have covertly supported the Bond films during the Cold War era.

You might have thought that the demise of the Cold War and the break up of the Soviet Union would have plunged Bond into a disastrous tail-spin. What was he going to do now that Britain's old adversary had disintegrated? Wisely, the film producers didn't attempt to resurrect the non-aligned criminal organisation, SPEC-TRE. Instead they came up with new storylines that reflected the current post-Cold War geopolitical condition.

Designed to appeal to the US market, Licence to Kill (1989) portrayed Bond embarking on a vendetta against a Central American drug baron. At the time of the film's release, the USA had already invaded Panama in order to overthrow the corrupt, drug-funded leadership of Manuel Noriega. This action was but one front in then-President George Bush senior's 'war on drugs', which was being waged throughout Latin America. Once more, the theme and location of a Bond film appeared highly opportune.

Following a hiatus in production, the latest Bond films, starring Pierce Brosnan, have confronted and even anticipated the geopolitics of the post-Cold War era. Goldeneye (1995), Tomorrow Never Dies (1997) and The World is Not Enough (1999) focus on the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of China as a new superpower. Significantly, two of these films (Goldeneye and The World is Not Enough) are played out against the backdrop of an unstable Russia and show Bond negotiating with ex-KGB
agents and rogue generals rather than elected officials from the new Russian government. The plot of *The World is Not Enough* is ahead of its time, with Bond sent to the Caspian Sea region to prevent a corrupt industrialist from strangling the West's access to Central Asian oil. Barbara Broccoli, one of the film's producers, admitted that the plot was conceived after reading an account of the USA's increasing interest in petroleum resources in the Caspian Sea.

Recent events, such as the 11 September attacks on the USA, will undoubtedly provide more material for the Bond producers. Remarkably, the current situation has witnessed the resurrection of the rhetoric of the Cold War. President Bush was quick to resort to the language of "crusades" and "homeland security" in order to invoke a sense of menace from "Islamic" terrorism. Even British Prime Minister Tony Blair has warned of the dangers to "our way of life", although he stands accused of falling into line with the USA a little too easily. On the domestic front, US and British citizens are being asked (with distant echoes, perhaps, of the Second World War and the 'just war' against Nazi Germany) to give up some of their freedoms in order to ensure protection against terrorism and 'rogue states' such as Iraq and North Korea. Military planning in the US and Britain continues apace as Bond's real-life equivalents struggle to collect new intelligence on an Islamic terror network. The cultural logic of the post-11 September world is depressingly similar to that of the Cold War.

Will Bond survive these uncertain times? Despite parodies and imitations such as the Austin Powers films, the Bond series will almost certainly continue to thrive because it reflects on real issues. As a form of cultural propaganda the films probably could not be surpassed. Although Bond may be a cliché, many viewers find him not only entertaining but also reassuring in a world where previously distant conflicts are gradually drawing closer to home.
The 007 Dossier has the best magazine articles, interviews, photos and videos - old and new - from around the world, and it’s all FREE! If you have enjoyed this publication, please visit www.the007Dossier.com to find many more.

JUST LOOK WHAT YOU’VE MISSED.

© 2013 The007Dossier.com. All rights reserved. James Bond 007 is a registered trademark of MGM Inc. A division of the United Artists Corporation and EON Productions Limited. All rights reserved.