

# Creating and Mirroring Monsters: Trump's America and Europe's Role in It

Written by Haakon A. Ikonomou

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As US Vice President J.D. Vance's recent speech at the Munich Security Conference made clear, Europe seems to be the new "monster" of the US Presidency – how did this come about? Sometimes it is helpful to engage in a bit of speculative analysis to grasp vast geopolitical changes of baffling complexity, to understand the phenomena in a new way. So, allow me to take you on an alternative journey of what is happening with the United States' relations to its geopolitical allies and competitors. It is a story of monster creation and monster mirroring, but most importantly how the relationship between the two processes impacts the current US administration.

### Creating Monsters

Teratogenesis (the term is borrowed from the medical world, but its Greek components simply means "monster" and "creation/formation of something") we could imagine as the process through which a state, a group of states, or a complex of polities create a *foreign monster* "out there", which it is necessary to mobilise against and fight. It is the discursive construction of a monstrous other – a projection not necessarily strategized into being, but which brings together an image which is rooted both in material interests and historically saturated tropes. It is the combination, that makes it effective.

In wartime, this is an important part of the propaganda apparatus: An example could be how the British, during the First World War, painted a picture of the barbaric Germans, by disseminating information and propaganda about its atrocities in the colonies and on the western battlefield. Today, Russia might be most blatantly invested in this, creating a depraved and feminized "west" that is a civilisational threat. It serves domestic and foreign policy purposes at once – indeed, it connects the two in "productive" ways. This might sound ominous, but most, if not all states engage in this, creating *terata* out there, that require action, taxes, priorities, alliances, mobilisation of resources etc., whether in peacetime or in times of war.

Bigger states will do more of this than smaller states, simply because they have – for the most part – more interests outside their borders. Great and superpowers have even more need for the instrument of teratogenesis. Often, the mutual teratogenesis between two or more competing great/superpowers will gain systemic traits, which sucks in other polities, that need to engage, chose sides, or evade the discursive web of dangerous or disgusting traits projected onto the other. We might imagine the Cold War in such a way; only with the greatest caution could states remain non-aligned and band together to escape the "monster-logic" of the USSR and the US. We can call this systemic teratogenesis.

As the enduring superpower of the latter half of the 20th century and the "reigning" superpower of the 21st century, no state has engaged in more systematic, but highly adaptable, teratogenesis than the United States. Think, for instance, about the transition from the Cold War rhetoric, through a brief unipolar moment, to the rhetoric of "war on terror". The war against terror, like the Cold War paradigm, highlights two elements of the teratogenesis: even though the creation of monsters is a discursive exercise, it is not unrelated to real concerns and material facts. 9/11 was a catalyst fuelled by real pain and loss and coalesced the United States and its allies around a new, and in many respects, real 'monster'. Yet, the process of projection was already well underway (Huntington's Clash of

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Civilizations, for instance, was published in 1996) and its tropes and imagery, as Edward Said has argued, went back centuries and had European imperial roots (Said 2003). Second, while teratogenesis is rhetorical in substance, its usefulness lies in it condoning, mobilising or organising action. Some of the choices made during the 'war on terror'-era seem almost unimaginable today, without the power of the discursive bubble, even on those that remained sceptical about the American strategy after September 2001 (Campbell 1998).

Recently, it has become increasingly clear that China is America's 'new' monster. Over the last decades, particularly since 2008 and picking up speed from Covid onwards (Trump's consistent use of the phrase "China virus" being only the most blatant example of this), American politicians and pundits have started to create a juxtaposed 'other' out of China, with enduring traits. In an article entitled "Yellow Techno-Peril: The 'Clash of Civilizations' and anti-Chinese racial rhetoric in the US-China AI arms race", scholar Kerry McInerney argues that US media coverage of the AI arms race evokes anti-Chinese racism in three ways. It frames the AI arms race as a civilizational and biological competition, portraying the 'East' and 'West' as "fundamentally irreconcilable". This is rooted in a techno-Orientalist history of the 'East' as both hypo- and hyper-technological, now amassing as a wave that will wash away the US. This Yellow Perilism, conflates and creates an undiscernible dangerous mass out of the Chinese state, people and even Chinese Americans. They are part of the same civilizational threat (McInerney 2024).

This teratogenesis has real implications, because it transforms what otherwise might have been a multi-faceted competitive and collaborative relationship into an existential struggle. This is encapsulated in statements like those of Senator Todd Young (R-IN), when Biden was in power, hoping that the administration would make sure "that we out-innovate, out-compete and out-grow the Chinese and also starve them of the capital that they need to continue to build their slaveholder state and their blue-water navy". Indeed, as one recent news article put it China might be the only remaining bipartisan issue left in Washington D.C. The CHIPS and Science Act, under the Biden administration, combined two bipartisan bills for massive investments in domestic high-tech research and semiconductor manufacturing aimed specifically at China. It is also a policy that enjoys general and high support amongst the US electorate – this support is explicitly linked to the fear of the 'monster out there'. In the most recent presidential election there were several instances, and a marked spike, in anti-china language and anti-asian violence against citizens in battleground states.

Some might intervene here, and say, this is just pure realism: a former hegemon challenged by an ascending superpower. That might be the most important underlying geopolitical driver, but what we are interested in, is the consistent and escalating rhetorical projection of monstrous traits that comes with it and – more importantly – sustains it. Teratogenesis has the trappings of rhetorical entrapment: the stickiness of the discourses gives a staying power beyond what might be in the rational interest of states. And, more importantly, it has the capacity to transform the creator itself.

## Mirroring Monsters

*Teratokatoptrismos* basically means mirroring monsters. My more general analytical point here is that in every systemic struggle of teratogenesis, the opposing great/superpowers start to absorb, or mirror, certain traits of their discursive other – voluntarily or involuntarily. The underlying reason could be that two or more rivals, even when propounding to represent irreconcilable worldviews, recognize that the other is competitive, and thus has certain traits that are enviable or instructive. Or, it could be a case of destroying the traits you claim to protect, in the effort of combatting the "other". This was partly the case with the United States' war on terror: its mass surveillance (Patriot Act), illegal wars (Iraq) and rogue use of a 'coalition of the willing', eroded many of the traits President Bush claimed to be defending the US against.

But with Trump, we need to dig a few feet deeper: He has fully absorbed the traits of America's ostensible geopolitical competitors, to such a degree, that he has, within record time engaged in a whole new teratogenesis, recycling both the interests and worldviews of Chinese Communist Party and Putin's Russia. To make this point, I need to go back to 2017.

Back in early 2017, I wrote a reflective essay entitled "Trump: Doublethink again", to try to make sense of the fact

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that White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer and Senior White House aide Kellyanne Conway, on behalf of Trump, deliberately introduced the concept of “alternative facts”. A sharp analysis came from someone (anonymous) working in the then recently departed Obama administration shortly after Spicer’s uncanny press conference. The strategic aim was “increasing the separation between Trump’s base (1/3 of the population) from everybody else (the remaining 2/3). By being told something that is obviously wrong – that there is no evidence for and all evidence against, that anybody with eyes can see is wrong – they are forced to pick whether they are going to believe Trump or their lying eyes. The gamble here – likely to pay off – is that they will believe Trump. This means that they will regard media outlets that report the truth as ‘fake news’ (because otherwise they’d be forced to confront their cognitive dissonance).” We are, (s)he continued, supposed to feel uncertain about “whether facts are knowable”.

The anonymous analysis, which went viral on Twitter, was inferring a strategic use of what George Orwell called doublethink, where the aim is that one is able to hold “two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously” and, accepting both of them, “[t]o tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them” and to “forget any fact that has become inconvenient” – “the lie always one leap ahead of the truth” (Orwell 1949, 220). My argument was that it could be useful to analyse Trump’s ascendancy to power as a series of “doublethinks”: Trump is the people/ Trump is the elite, or Donald Trump deconstructs the State/Donald Trump is the State. These, I think, still largely hold true.

The last doublethink I introduced was a bit more speculative: Perhaps the supposed economic arch enemy – China – was just as much a foe as it was a model, I suggested back in 2017. China’s success lies in the combination of a vast and cheap labour supply, low transaction costs due to developments in technology, radical changes in policies without being subject to too much democratic pressure, and a high degree of protectionism (in China’s case through state purchases, direct subsidy, anti-dumping tariffs, exchange rate controls and red tape). China had been the winner of globalisation the last three decades not by abiding to the foundational liberal myth that underpins it, but by building an alternative model atop of it – Trump seemed to think that this was a winning recipe, I argued. The last doublethink was thus: Trump ushers in the new politics of American economic nationalism/Trump’s America is China.

This was putting too fine a point on it, I thought back then, and so I hedged my bets a bit:

Still, if Trump gets his way, the American people will be left with something entirely different than China, and, indeed, something other than a nation[state]: It will be the bare bones of a state apparatus – legal institutions, a capacity for violence, and a continuous production of dubious narratives – geared towards serving a narrowly defined set of interests (Ikonomou 2017/2020).

Now, I believe this is an obvious case of “monster mirroring”, because we could argue that the other part of the equation (my bet hedging), is basically mirroring the Russian ‘monster’. We need to remember that President Trump’s biggest doublethink – the doublethink of autocratic minds – was delivered from the very outset and is something he intends to serve the American people again and again until he is stopped: Make America Great Again/The American Dream is Dead.

The messianic MAGA-ideology receives a lot of scholarly and journalistic attentions, deservedly. But it was always connected to his view that the American dream was *dead*. That America was weak, feminine, decaying, collapsing: Being cheated by the Chinese, invaded by Mexican migrants, exploited by lazy Europeans, and corrupted by Washington elites. America had forgotten that it was strong, manly, imperious – someone needed to wipe the slate clean and start anew. Much like Putin’s political project became to recreate Russian greatness after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the humiliating and disastrous experience of the 1990s, Trump wants to restore American greatness. Much like Russia has reintroduced the geopolitical thinking of imperial zones of interest, Trump now seems bent on creating a Trumpian Monroe Doctrine for America’s ‘sphere of interest’. The transformation of the Republican party into ‘apparatchiks’, the efforts to purge and recreate a loyal federal administration, and the close, corrupt and transactional relationship with an oligarchic class of CEOs, mirrors both Putin’s Russia and the Chinese Communist Party. In other words, just like he is mirroring many of the traits of the “Chinese Monster” in economic terms, Trump has almost fully absorbed the Russian playbook of “teratogenesis” in political and ideological terms.

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Trump's increasing radicalization, as many have documented, seems to be the result of the links and ideological persuasions of the people in his close-knit team, Trump's social media digest, and Russian efforts to influence and tap into both. We are witnessing the unfolding of this now. As Ukrainian President Zelensky stated, after Trump claimed that Ukraine had initiated the war with Russia, Trump "lives in a disinformation space" of Russian propaganda. This, however, only makes sense if we take into account the process of *Teratokatoptrismos*, which is rooted in his view that in competition with geopolitical enemies, the American dream was dead.

## Seeing like an autocrat: the European monster

With the two processes linked, the current US administration has not only mirrored its (former) monsters, but it is also *looking* for monsters in the same way. Speculating about this could be helpful, in order to understand the Trump administration's view of Europe.

Europe is now the monster in a transformed presidency, that has taken colour from the teratogenesis of the past. Europe is, as in the Russian civilizational critique, a bastion of wokeism, weakness and decay. As Vice President Vance made clear at the Security Conference in Munich, Europe's greatest challenge is not an imperial Russia invading Ukraine; no, it is its own woke-totalitarian stance against far-right freedom-seeking forces within its borders. In a MAGA-perspective the EU abroad is thus the equivalent of the Democrats at home – they are eroding the true values underpinning American 'frontier heroism'.

The European Union, moreover, is the purest form of the deep-state, bureaucratic swamp, that Trump has promised to drain in the US. And the EU's regulations and laws for business, trade, technology and goods, is the worst-case scenario for the tech-oligarchs and CEO-crazy inhabiting the new administration's top tiers. They would love nothing more than the European space being turned into a plethora of deregulated (and reregulated) and malleable economic zones (Slobodian 2023).

And as Trump's plans for Greenland, Panama, Canada and other areas shows, it is, it seems, not only easier, but in fact correct, to bully close allies and smaller states into submission, when they are 'too weak' to resist American unilateralism. With this, Trump has left behind not only the latter decades of pretending to uphold a rules-based order, but also the institutional architecture that the American's themselves have built over the last century.

In this way, Europe is now trapped in America's past. A past 'rules-based' order, marshalled by a closely aligned West, in the name of free markets, democratic freedom and Atlantic superiority. As a recent report initiated by the Quincy Institute made clear, with the current trajectory, the US Government is well on its way to allowing, indeed actively creating, a world of competing imperial orders, with spheres of interests in a multipolar international society, while further inviting China to fill the void of the US's former global engagement. This might suit the short-term aims of the US, Russian and even Chinese leadership, but it is a dangerous and volatile world to be in. The teratogenesis has thus come full circle, and if Europe is described as a monster, it is because Europe is a monster in Trump's worldview.

With facts unknowable in MAGA-land, we will witness the Trump administration engaged in an always shifting teratogenesis: every day a new monster to kill, every day something new to fear (in domestic strategic terms, this also helps "flooding the zone"). Something or someone will always be 'terrible'. Opposite, something or someone will always be 'great'. And as we already know, what is 'terrible' one day, may be 'great' the other. And we, on the receiving end, will have to engage in monstrous amounts of doublethink, if we are to accept this: We are now to believe that Ukraine is both part and not part of US peace-talks with Russia, for instance; we are to believe that the US are Europe's security guarantor through NATO, while they are undermining European security and telling us to fend for ourselves. But, as I have speculated here, there are certain longer trends that can be discerned and which should be instructive. I have tried to analyse this through the lens of *Teratogenesis* and *Teratokatoptrismos* – it should make it easier for Europe to escape the Trumpian call to accept an endless stream of geopolitical doublethinks and opt for strategic clarity.

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