**Headline:** China’s Response to Bullying: The Historical Lessons Learned

By Biljana Vankovska

**Author Bio:** This article was produced by [Globetrotter](https://globetrotter.media/). Biljana Vankovska is a professor of political science and international relations at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, a member of the Transnational Foundation of Peace and Future Research (TFF) in Lund, Sweden, and the most influential public intellectual in Macedonia.

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**[Article Body:]**

A friend from another country recently [posted](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn%3Ali%3AugcPost%3A7318565827128000512?commentUrn=urn%3Ali%3Acomment%3A%28ugcPost%3A7318565827128000512%2C7318575340124094464%29&dashCommentUrn=urn%3Ali%3Afsd_comment%3A%287318575340124094464%2Curn%3Ali%3AugcPost%3A7318565827128000512%29) on social media, ‘I visited the exhibition *The Road to Rejuvenation* at the National Museum of China. It tells the harrowing story of the “Century of Humiliation”. Now I finally understand why every Chinese citizen feels compelled to visit. Most nations would have hidden or erased such a shameful chapter. But not China – and for good reason. The Chinese people have vowed never again to be humiliated’.

One does not need to be a historian to grasp the suffering, exploitation, and humiliation endured by the Chinese people from the mid-19th century to the victory of the Chinese Revolution. This was a [period](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202107/06/WS60e397a2a310efa1bd65fda8.html) of profound national trauma: military defeats, social collapse, colonial subjugation, and a series of unequal treaties imposed by Western powers.

I eventually discussed the era of humiliation with a different, younger academic colleague from Shanghai and asked him about its effect on today’s China policy. In private correspondence, he wrote the following: ‘[T]he humiliation was too deep and scary for us to forget. That century was arguably the darkest time of Chinese history. Chinese civilisation almost got exterminated and colonised. That… lesson taught us that we should not expect other nations to be friendly to us, we have to be able to develop and defend ourselves’.

These historical experiences offer a crucial lens through which to interpret the behaviour of Chinese leadership in today’s turbulent global context. My colleague, Professor Zhang Weiwei of Shanghai, speaks of China not merely as a nation-state but as a [civilisational state](https://www.noemamag.com/china-rises-as-the-ideal-civilizational-state/) – a political and cultural entity rooted in 5,000 years of continuous tradition, despite changing dynasties and territorial configurations. When one speaks with ordinary Chinese citizens, particularly younger generations, there is a palpable sense of [optimism](https://asianews.network/chinese-level-of-trust-in-government-tops-global-list/) and national pride, a stark contrast to the atmosphere in many Western societies. Strikingly, this pride does not translate into hatred, resentment, or calls for revenge. Rather, China has emerged from its historical humiliation with a firm commitment to dignity, peace, and cooperation.

That a country can rise from such profound degradation to become a global economic powerhouse, while promoting narratives of partnership and mutual respect, is nothing short of extraordinary. China is, in many ways, a global [rarity](https://transnational.live/2025/03/25/complementarity-is-possible-chinese-and-western-ways-of-thinking-3/).

Every nation is shaped by the historical, social, and political trials it has endured. Collective memory is not first-hand recollection of events, but the intergenerational transmission of historical lessons and identity. Many nations, when given the opportunity to curate their own historical narratives, fall into the trap of highlighting only their most glorious moments. Like a photoshopped selfie, this creates a flattering but false image. The mature approach to history is not selective amnesia but courageous introspection. It takes wisdom to learn from past humiliations and strength to declare: never again.

It is in this spirit that contemporary Chinese policy should be understood. From the early days of the U.S.-China tariff ‘[war](https://responsiblestatecraft.org/china-tariffs/)’, Xi Jinping responded with remarkable restraint and strategic clarity. While Donald Trump sought [spectacle](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/apr/02/perilous-chaotic-donald-trump-liberation-day-fix-world-broken-economy), China remained calm and methodical, responding through [action](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202504/15/WS67fdae2ba3104d9fd381f445.html) rather than rhetoric. Trump, in effect, lifted a stone only to drop it on his own foot – a Chinese saying not unlike the Western idiom about shooting oneself in the foot. Unsurprisingly, there is dismay in the West: what on earth did Trump have in mind?

Meanwhile, Xi signed dozens of bilateral cooperation agreements – over forty with [Vietnam](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202504/15/WS67fda69aa3104d9fd381f3d3.html) alone – and expanded China’s diplomatic and economic ties, including with some rational-minded EU countries. China will not allow itself to be returned to the status of a subordinate or humiliated state. It is not intimidated by racist slurs like those uttered by figures such as JD Vance, who dismissed Chinese citizens as ‘peasants’. Unlike its opponents, China pursues its national interests without resorting to humiliation or coercion.

Tragically, the path ahead appears increasingly fraught. U.S. trade tariffs have lost their economic rationale and may soon give way to a comprehensive system of de facto [sanctions](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60nAbEMUfa0). The aim is clear: to isolate and weaken China under the guise of economic competition. The Taiwan issue remains the most dangerous trigger – a potential military trap. Analysts now predict that Washington will pressure weaker nations to sever ties with China in exchange for tariff relief or other incentives.

Yet China is not the country it was a century ago. It will not yield to imperial [bullying](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202504/10/WS67f78f70a3104d9fd381e9d1.html). Attempts to install friendly regimes through colour revolutions have already failed in Georgia, and even more so in Russia. A sober analysis reveals that the United States has not won a major war since before Vietnam, and is arguably losing in Ukraine as well.

In the long run, China will adapt and [endure](https://www.counterpunch.org/2025/04/16/in-trade-war-with-the-us-china-holds-a-lot-more-cards-than-trump-may-think-%E2%88%92-in-fact-it-might-have-a-winning-hand/) – even if the outcome differs from Beijing’s current vision. Some [analysts](https://www.bjopinion.com/p/china-will-greatly-increase-its-lead) are sure that China will greatly increase its lead in economic growth in 2025 compared to the U.S. Yet, we have a greater global concern that goes beyond winning the economic race. Namely, the peace plan for Ukraine is [fading](https://global.espreso.tv/russia-ukraine-war-peace-in-24-hours-the-end-of-an-illusion), Europe is [rearming](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VfV9y60-E0&t=817s), and the world’s crises remain unsolved. Trump is no peacemaker, but neither is he the master of the [White House](https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2025/04/10/donald-trump-vulnerabilities-tariffs-budget-00283251). Meanwhile, [Gaza](https://chrishedges.substack.com/p/israel-is-about-to-empty-gaza) is being emptied at horrifying speed – a child dies every 45 minutes – and yet the world sees no path to resolution.

Drawing China into military confrontation may prove catastrophic for the so-called Empire of Chaos. It may have negative consequences for China, but that move will be a catalyst for the Empire’s fall. Yet the rest of the world, too, will pay a price that could be far too high. Unless the Global Majority awakens and unites more quickly than planned…