

# A Century of Humiliation: The Power of Economic Warfare

**by Sam Ku**

***A free people ought not only to be armed but disciplined; to which end a uniform and well digested plan is requisite: And their safety and interest require that they should promote such manufactories, as tend to render them independent on others...***

**— George Washington, January 8, 1790<sup>1</sup>**

Through all the sensational headlines of 2017 and 2018, it is easy to lose focus on the opioid epidemic that is killing more than 115 Americans every day.<sup>2</sup> To put that into perspective, in 2016 alone this epidemic killed three times more Americans than the combined total of the Global War on Terror, Persian Gulf War, and Spanish-American War.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, as of 2016 over 11.5 million Americans were directly affected by this epidemic resulting in an economic cost of 504 billion dollars to the United States.<sup>4</sup> At a micro level, these numbers paint an unfortunate picture of human pain and suffering occurring throughout the United States. At the macro level, these numbers represent a strategic dilemma that can decrease the present and future power of the United States.

The opioid crisis serves to illustrate the relationship between a state and its population. In order to understand the strategic dilemma facing the United States, this paper will clarify why people within a state are important. I will begin by analyzing the idea of power and how states derive power to protect themselves. The role that people play within a state will help shed light on the consequences of a strategy that can directly or indirectly affect its people. Extreme examples of this strategy can be found in the events of the opium crisis throughout 19th century China, as well as the current U.S. opioid crisis. In a globalized environment, there are more ways than open warfare to attack a state. An effective strategy is one aimed at the people of a state and not its military. Directly

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degrading the people of a society is a powerful way to degrade a state and render it incapable of being a threat. A state without a strong and capable population base is limited in its ability to respond to both internal and external hazards due to a lack of skill and capacity.

First, it is important to define a State. The prevailing theory of what defines a state is found at Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention of the Rights and Duties of States. A state comprises of a permanent population, defined territory, effective government, and capacity to enter into relations with other states.<sup>5</sup> There is an abundance of scholarly work concerning territorial integrity, governance, and diplomacy, but insufficient literature addressing population-based incursions. A population incursion can be as destructive to a state as a physical territorial invasion, or any other attack focused on what comprises a state.

Chas Freeman explains the different powers possessed by states in his book *Arts of Power*. According to Freeman, a state exists as an instrument of its people and is solely concerned about its own survival and continued independence.<sup>6</sup> “A state will defend its continued independent existence at the cost of all other interests and with every means and resource at its disposal.”<sup>7</sup> The foundation of the means and resources available to a state exists in its military, economic, political, and cultural strengths.<sup>8</sup> It is in these strengths that a state derives its power to protect itself. Power is measured in the degree a state can alter the behavior of other states, as well as how opponents perceive their capabilities.<sup>9</sup> Current capabilities and perception of future capabilities are both relevant to a state’s power.

Adding to Freeman’s definition of power, Joseph Nye in his book *Understanding International Conflicts*, defines power as “the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants.”<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Nye’s definition also includes the aspect of being able to accomplish one’s goals as another component of power.<sup>11</sup>

In order to use power properly, a state has to be able to convert their potential power, the resources they possess, into realized power - the actual outcome they are trying to achieve.<sup>12</sup> Nye defines this process as power conversion, and it is a basic problem all states must consider. The people that live within a state are a resource, if not the main resource. Without a healthy and strong internal population, a state has nothing else to convert into realized power unless it is willing to rely on a foreign population.

**One of the most important forms of economic resources available to a state exists with its people.**

The success of a state depends on both its ability to convert its power, as well as to refine its resources. A state’s economic resources nurture the full potential of a state’s power.<sup>13</sup> One of the most important forms of economic resources available to a state exists with its people. The knowledge, skills, and ingenuity of its people determines what can and cannot be produced within the state. A state like China, with the largest population in the world, has a large amount of potential power. Through education and training, China can refine that resource and convert it into something positive for the state. The reduction of a state’s ability to refine this resource can greatly hinder any future realized power. Furthering that idea, a strategy to damage the resource itself while improving your own resources is a strategy that provides both a defensive and offensive advantage.

One way people contribute to a state is through taxation. Taxation allows a state to acquire the funds required to sustain and improve its capabilities.<sup>14</sup> The funds of a state give it the ability to purchase and establish security. States can purchase military equipment, information, and even the allegiances of people from other states. In 1997, an official from Russia’s Federal

Security Service advised that a Russian spy could be turned for \$1 million; however, a CIA operative would require \$2 million to betray their country.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, in response to Russia's launch of Sputnik 1, President Eisenhower won approval from Congress to set up the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) to catch up to Russia's rocket technology.<sup>16</sup> The creation and success of ARPA are attributed to the funds provided by the state. ARPA would later become the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency responsible for the research of breakthrough technologies for the national security of the United States.<sup>17</sup> It is important for a state to protect its people from factors that might decrease their ability to contribute to the economy. A decrease in contribution translates to a decrease in funds, which would then limit the powers of a state.

**Economic warfare is about deterring or limiting an adversary's ability to inflict damage through the disruption of its resources.**

Another way people within a state contribute to a state's success is through manufacturing and economic development. Everything a state is able to manufacture or develop is dependent on the knowledge and capability of its people: "...the men on the home front who are producing the material things which the army and the navy and the air force need are the economic background of the effectiveness of the fighting force."<sup>18</sup> One of the closest links between states and other states is in the form of their economic interactions. It is this reason why economic power is important. Economic power is a way for a state to influence the people of other states, which in turn can also influence a political system.<sup>19</sup> The United States policy of integrating China into the global markets was

based on the idea that free trade would lead to political liberalization for the country.<sup>20</sup> Through economic power, states are also able to attack people from other states, directly or indirectly. The use of economic power in this way is most notably known as economic warfare.

According to Tor Egil Forland, economic warfare is "an intense, coercive disturbance of an adversary state, aimed at diminishing its power."<sup>21</sup> Economic warfare is about deterring or limiting an adversary's ability to inflict damage through the disruption of its resources. The disruption can be in the form of reducing an adversary's output of a product.<sup>22</sup> Traditional definitions of economic warfare are divided into its use with and without the application of other powers, such as its military. In war time and combined with military power, economic warfare took the form of blockades. By cutting off an enemy state from external trade, blockades can deplete an adversary's resources, strength, and ability to wage war. In its simplest form, it is isolating and possibly starving the people of an adversary into submission. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Great Britain's naval forces were able to control enemy ports and shipping routes preventing the export or import of goods.<sup>23</sup> This ability gave Great Britain a heightened level of international power. Economic warfare can also occur as a single force without the use of other powers in the form of sanctions and embargoes.

Slightly different from Forland, Dr. William Culbertson defines economic warfare as using the economic potential of a country "for the purpose of defense and attack."<sup>24</sup> Culbertson's concept of economic warfare rests on two principles: strengthening allies and destroying enemy war potential. An example of strengthening allies is the U.S. mechanism known as "lend-lease" where countries pool their resources together to provide aid where it is most needed.<sup>25</sup> The second principle, which is the most important, is the idea of destroying or limiting the enemies'

war potential. This can be accomplished by controlling exports, imports, funds, and even destroying industries. These efforts are all centered on potential resources so that they do not become realized. By freezing enemy funds, the enemy cannot use them to purchase equipment or pay its soldiers. What is interesting about Culbertson's concept of economic warfare is his description of Germany's method of economic warfare during World War II: "All these are measures seeking to destroy the war potential of the enemy. Germany has carried this process of destruction to a refinement which is brutal and extremely devastating in the systematic spoliation of conquered peoples."<sup>26</sup> Culbertson recognizes that people play a role in the war potential of a state. Germany's actions in context are focused on the people of a defeated state, but it can also be applied to people of an adversarial state not during a time of war. Through economic warfare, the capability of a people to manufacture and provide revenue can be diminished, which then results in a state's war potential being reduced.

The ideas of Forland and Culbertson are centered on how to economically prevent a state from prospering through trade. Economic warfare has traditionally been explored in terms of blockades, sanctions, and tariffs - all ways to restrict the flow of goods to an adversary. There is no doubt to the ethical dilemma associated with this action as civilian populations starve because of these restrictive measures. Economic warfare should also be explored through economic injections. A state can provide to its adversaries a commodity or product so powerfully that it diminishes the adversary's people. It is the action of undermining the power of a state by weakening its most valuable resource: its people.

The abundant supply or production of a product to flood a foreign market is a tactic used as early as the 16th century. From 16th century to the 18th century, mercantilism was the dominant economic theory. "Mercantilism was

an economic policy pursued by almost all of the trading nations in the late sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries, which aimed at increasing a nation's wealth and power by encouraging the export of goods in return for gold."<sup>27</sup> The use of trade to acquire gold also took the form of flooding a country with goods.<sup>28</sup> The action of flooding or dominance of another state's economy means acquiring as much gold as possible in return for the sale of goods.

The problem faced by European and American traders, throughout the late 18th to early 19th century was that China did not want to buy anything from the west. During that time, Western traders were able to buy silk, porcelain, silverware, and most importantly tea from the Chinese.<sup>29</sup> For the British, tea was a necessity of life, and China was the primary tea supplier.<sup>30</sup> China however believed they already "possessed everything worth having, and hence needed no barbarian manufactures."<sup>31</sup> To counter the trade deficit, the British identified opium as key to their success.

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The history of opium usage in China reaches back to 400 A.D. when Arab traders first introduced opium from Egypt.<sup>32</sup> The actual act of smoking opium was initially considered to be "barbaric and subversive" by the Chinese.<sup>33</sup> This idea changes in the 1700s when the Dutch reintroduced opium smoking to the Chinese with the use of tobacco pipes.<sup>34</sup> The negative effects of opium caused the Chinese Emperor Yung Chen to prohibit the smoking and domestic sale of opium in 1729 except for medicinal purposes.<sup>35</sup> The partial ban was not enough, and a complete ban on opium occurred in 1799 by Emperor Kia King.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the multiple bans on opium, both the British and Americans flourished from its sale. British smuggling of opium into China quickly rose from 1,000 chests in the 1760s, to 40 thousand chests (2,500 tons) of opium in 1839.<sup>37</sup> While not as large as the British, American traders shipped approximately 1,000 to 2,000 chests of opium annually from 1815 to 1820.<sup>38</sup> Smugglers used native Chinese as part of the distribution process. “The dangerous and unpleasant part of the business – bribing officials, delivering the narcotic ashore, and retailing to addicts was handled by the Chinese dealers.”<sup>39</sup> While the trade of opium flourished in China, the people did not. The use of opium in China increased from 3 million in the 1830s to an estimated 40 million addicts in the 1890s, or roughly 10 percent of the total population.<sup>40</sup>

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A Chinese governor, Zhang Zhidong, of the Shanxi province in northern central China, observed that all classes of people from military officers to wives and children are using opium.<sup>41</sup> On average, 8 out of 10 households in the cities of the Shanxi province smoked opium, which degraded that population.<sup>42</sup> According to Zhan Zhidong:

“Laziness and dejection is all around, the youthful spirit has gone, officials do not attend to their duties, and workers are not assiduous . . . scholars, farmers, workers and businessmen lose their jobs because their health is damaged; the majority are thin, weak, and in rags; they are sick and poor; their lives are ever more cramped; and their households become worse off every day.”<sup>43</sup>

As stated by Zhan, the mass effect of opium was able to devastate everything around the user.

A Chinese prohibition activist, Xu Jue, published a story about his maid to illustrate the extent of ruin that occurred because of opium use. The maid’s family was initially economically healthy, owning enough land to farm and sustain themselves. When her husband began to smoke opium, her son and daughter-in-law followed along. Her daughter-in-law had two sons; the younger of two at the age of five also had an opium addiction. Her daughter-in-law had sold off the older son as a slave for money to buy opium. Additionally, the maid’s family had to sell all their land to support their habit, but that was not enough, so she now works as a maid.<sup>44</sup>

The spread of opium and its infectious nature infiltrated into all aspects of Chinese life. An “Anti-Opium Song” was passed down in the southern coastal city of Fujian, China to warn of the consequences of opium use. The lyrics are a tale of individual and national suffering:

“When first you smoke, the blood runs hot; but smoke more, need more, and soon you are sot.

Skin and bones, the fat became lean; everyone calls me an opium fiend.

An opium addict cannot sit still; sells his wife, his kids, and the land they till.

Wife and daughter, the fields he tends; all go up in smoke in the opium den.

Evil merchants sell the drug to make money for the West; disaster for the nation – it can’t be for the best.”<sup>45</sup>

In 1838, Lin Zexu, an important official tasked with suppressing the opium trade, echoed the idea of a national disaster from opium when he said, “In several decades China will have hardly any soldiers to resist a hostile army.”<sup>46</sup> Shortly after Lin’s statement, China would enter into a period known as the “Century of

Humiliation” from 1839 to 1949, which is categorized by the Chinese people as a period of suffering and shame.<sup>47</sup>

There are multiple similarities between the United States opioid crisis and China’s past struggles with opium. In the United States, both legal and illegal opioids have taken a toll on the population. According to an article by Doctors Rummans, Burton, and Dawson, the misuse of opioids is a result of increased prescriptions.<sup>48</sup> The increased prescriptions, as an act similar to flooding a market, contributed to misuse and even death. Opioid prescription increased from two million in 1990 to nearly sixty-two million in 2016.<sup>49</sup> “The United States leads the world in opioid use, consuming roughly 80 percent of all the world’s opioids.”<sup>50</sup> In 2015, opioid related deaths caused by illicit opioids, such as heroin and fentanyl equaled that of prescribed opioids. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency and the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, China is the main “source of fentanyl, related drugs, and the chemicals used to make them.”<sup>51</sup> On an economic scale, the cost to the United States from the opioid crisis is greater than the 2016 military expenditure of China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, India, and France combined.<sup>52</sup> This cost accounts for the services associated with the addiction to include emergency response, health care and criminal justice. Just like opium, the mass effect of opioid use has spread and infected all aspects of society.

Opium and opioid use have not just decreased the potential power of a state, but also its perceived power. In 2016, the police department of East Liverpool, Ohio, shared a picture on their Facebook page of a couple who had overdosed on heroin in a car with their child in the back seat. Such images disseminated throughout the internet show the vulnerabilities of the United States and its inability to protect its people. In 1878, the Chinese had a similar problem where their international image was severely damaged because of opium smoking.

One of two Chinese diplomats deployed to Europe, Guo Songtao was mortified upon being shown “pictures of Chinese men and women lying inertly while smoking opium in plain sight;” by a British Parliament member.<sup>53</sup>

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Analysis of the opium and opioid epidemics show similar patterns of behavior that span culture, time, and space. Similar to traditional forms of economic warfare that depend on denying an adversary of a resource, this type of warfare simply works in reverse. In replicating an epidemic, there must first be the identification of a product or multiple products that a targeted population is susceptible to, and is not initially taboo in nature. Next is to continually supply as much of the product as possible, and distribute it through a native entity of that population. A native entity of distribution is important in that it already has cultural understanding and a level of trust. Once the demand of the product is established, it will spread throughout that population despite any efforts to suppress it. The time it takes the product to spread and infect the population, depends on the level of susceptibility of the people and potency of the product. Opium and opioid are extreme examples of a product that is able to create an insatiable need where the user is willing to sacrifice everything for its sake. There can be other products that are not as extreme or malicious, but are still capable of harming a people in such a way as to diminish their potential to be refined for the benefit of a state.

The people of a state: their will, strength, knowledge, and bond, are its primary power resource. An economic warfare strategy to

damage that resource can render a state powerless. A method that centers on the continued supply of a product, which feeds off the weaknesses of a people, can be as disastrous to a state as full-scale warfare. Examples found in the effects of opium and opioid abuse show the discourse needed prior to using that level of economic warfare due to the suffering it can cause. More importantly, it shows how vulnerable a people can be once an addictive commodity has infiltrated into the population.

The current strategic environment is as complex and dangerous as any the United States has ever faced. *The Joint Environment 2035* publication stated, “The United States’ approach to high-technology warfare over the past two decades has encouraged the development of asymmetric, unconventional, irregular, and hybrid approaches by adversaries.”<sup>54</sup> State and non-state adversaries are countering U.S. military might in ways never thought possible. Prior to September 11, 2001, no strategist could have predicted the world changing and the deadly capabilities of box cutters. In an age of endless possibilities, all imaginable actions must be considered. A U.S. population not strong or smart enough to counter adversarial incursions might find itself at the beginning of its own “Century of Humiliation.” **IAJ**

## NOTES

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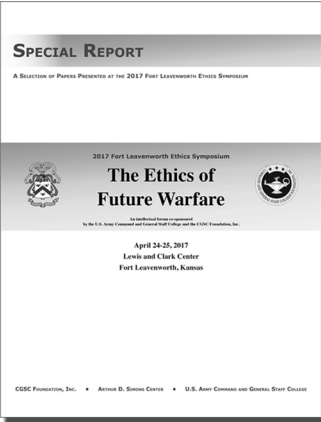
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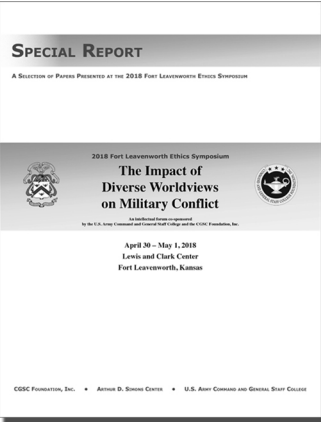
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