

Demographic Security Comes of Age

On the day I began to write this essay, *The New York Times* reported that Pakistan planned to bulldoze all Afghan refugee camps within three miles of its northwest border. U.S. intelligence satellites had tracked cross-border movements to and from these settlements, and Pakistani Army units repeatedly engaged insurgents in the area (Gall, 2004). Another article discussed international opposition to the wall Israel is constructing on the West Bank—ostensibly to eliminate terrorist incursions, but in practice to exclude and isolate the rapidly growing Palestinian population (Hoge, 2004). Two other accounts attracted my attention: a report on U.S. foreign aid for Haiti, which has the youngest and fastest growing population in the Western Hemisphere, and an analysis of factional political violence in the Gaza Strip—a tiny enclave that hosts one of the youngest and fastest growing populations in Asia.

What do these articles have in common? Each focused on an event with implications for national or global security and had an unmistakable demographic component, and therefore, lies within the domain of “demographic security.” Demographic security addresses the security aspects of:

- A population’s size, age structure, geographic distribution, or ethnic composition; and
- Changes in these demographic conditions and interactions among them, including migration, population growth, shifts in the age structure, and changing location and proportion of ethnic and religious groups.

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Demographic security issues are on many multilateral agendas, as demonstrated by the European Union’s concern with its aging native population and its growing Muslim communities (Savage, 2004), and the UN’s focus on poverty, trade in light weapons, and HIV transmission in new cities along the truck routes winding through Africa (Hope, 1998; UN-Habitat, 2003). These seemingly hodge-podge issues are connected by a common theoretical thread: the “demographic transition,” or the process by which a population characterized by relatively short lives and large families is transformed into a population composed principally of people living longer lives and having small families (Figure 1). In our 2003 monograph *The Security Demographic: Population and Civil Conflict after the Cold War*, my colleagues, Robert Engelman and Daniele Anastasion, and I contend that the demographic transition is the key to understanding demographic security issues.

Civil Strife and Soft Landings

To test this notion, we compared demographic data from the United Nations Population Division (UNPD, 2003) and the Uppsala Conflict Data Project’s global database.¹ We focused only on *civil conflicts*—revolutions, ethnic and religious insurgencies, state-sponsored violence, and domestic terrorism. This broad class of intrastate conflicts nearly tripled in annual prevalence between 1950 and 1992, and their average duration has grown since the 1980s (Collier, Hoeffler, & Söderbom, 2001).

After filtering out persistent and recurring conflicts, we found countries in the early and middle stages of the demographic transition—with high birth and death rates—much more likely to experience an outbreak of new civil conflict than those farther along in the transi-

tion (i.e., with lower birth and death rates). The trend held up through the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the post-Cold War 1990s, suggesting that superpower funding, training, and military hardware may have influenced the nature and intensity of Cold War-era civil conflicts more than developing states' vulnerability to them (see Figure 2).

Our research also shows that the statistical likelihood of civil conflict decreased consistently as countries' birth rates declined, suggesting that for most states, the demographic transition promotes a "soft landing." Significantly, a soft landing is not an inherent property of the democratic transition, which features instabilities midway along its path. Partial democracies—states offering an institutional admixture of civil freedoms and authoritarian constraints—are more statistically vulnerable to state failure than either fully democratic or wholly authoritarian regimes (Esty et al., 1999).

Some developing countries appear to risk similar instabilities midway through their transition to an open free-market economy. In a series of analytical case studies, Amy Chua (2002) has demonstrated that IMF-leveraged liberalization policies unwittingly provide market-savvy ethnic minorities with opportunities to gain further control over capital. Coupled with fast-paced democratic reforms, increased inequalities fuel ethnic animosities, boost popular support for nationalist political movements and, in some cases, act as a springboard for demagogues to attain political office (Chua, 2002).

The security dynamics of these transitions lend credence to the hypothesis that early-phase states—including Iraq, Pakistan, and Nigeria—might lower their risk of civil conflict during their transitions to democracy and free markets if they advanced through the demographic transition. This thesis explains the substantial democratic, social, and economic progress of certain East Asian states (particularly South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia), where significant declines in fertility preceded substantial and successful democratic and free-market reforms.

Demographic Risk Factors

Researchers have found at least eight demographic topics associated with political instability or conflict. These are:

High proportion of young adults ages 15 to 29 years—a "youth bulge"—among the working-age population. In the 1990s, states with a large youth bulge were nearly 2.5 times as likely to experience an outbreak of civil conflict as other states (Cincotta, Engelman, & Anastasion, 2003).² York University researchers Christian Mesquida and Neil Weiner (1996, 1999) have also demonstrated that the intensity of recent conflict in war-torn regions is positively correlated to the proportion of young adults in the adult population.

Rapid urban population growth. During the 1990s, countries with a high rate of urban population growth were about twice as likely as other states to experience an outbreak of civil conflict. On the ground, researchers and policymakers may find it difficult to separate urban growth and the youth bulge. In countries where agriculture is no longer promising, young adults typically migrate to urban centers in search of education, employment, and opportunities for immigration. Thus, urban centers, where political protest is more easily organized, tend to have unusually high proportions of young adults in their working-age population (Fuller & Pitts, 1990).

Low levels of per capita cropland and/or fresh water. Cross-country statistical evidence does not demonstrate that low per capita supplies of either fresh water or cropland increase the risk of full-fledged civil conflict on their own. Nonetheless, the added risks to states under stress could be underrated. For example, in the 1990s, about half of all countries with high proportions of young adults *and* low levels of one or both of these critical resources experienced an outbreak of civil conflict (Cincotta et al, 2003). Leif Ohlsson (2000) has argued that scarcities of critical natural resources undermine the ability of agricultural economies to absorb labor, promoting landless poverty and thus accelerating the growth of urban slums and providing potential recruits for insurgencies.



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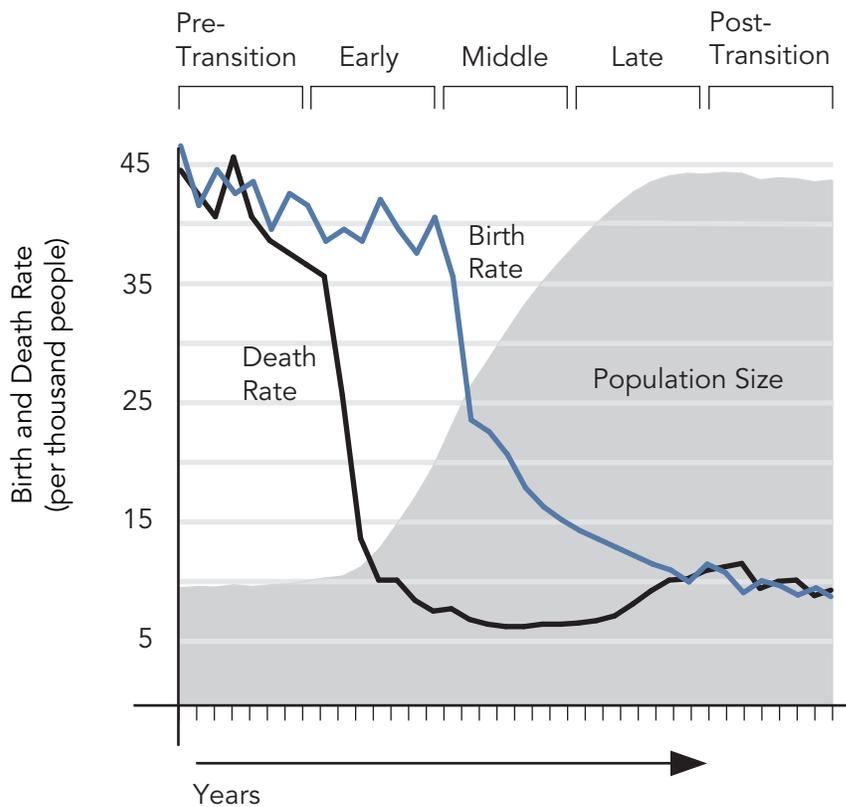


Figure 1. The demographic transition (an idealized version of which is pictured) is comprised of two components: birth rate and death rate transitions. Historically, the death rates have dropped before birth rates. Rapid population growth occurs when a gap opens up between birth and death rates. Individually, birth rate and death rate transitions have taken from 50 to 150 years to complete. Some developing countries are passing through these transitions rapidly, much faster than European or North American populations did during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Source: Cincotta, Engelman, and Anastasian (2003)

High mortality rates among working-age adults (indicative of high rates of AIDS mortality). There is insufficient statistical evidence to link HIV/AIDS to the outbreak of conflict. Nonetheless, we should explore the arguments that point to the disease's effects: large youth bulge, the loss of key professionals, weakened military and police units, and unprecedented numbers of orphans. The future demographic impacts of HIV/AIDS are likely to exceed those of the 1980s and 1990s dramatically.

Differential growth rates among ethnic and religious groups. Tensions can arise when changes in ethnic or religious group distribution and composition (the proportions of such

groups in the population) are perceived as threats to the political character, traditions, or cultural practices of another group. Tensions can also arise when groups are denied political access commensurate with their perceived share of the population. Such tensions are likely to increase in the 21st century, as ethnic populations within countries progress through the demographic transition. Unfortunately, many countries lack accurate data on ethnic composition and differential ethnic fertility and mortality rates, limiting opportunities for country analyses and cross-national comparisons.

Migration. Refugees and other cross-border migrants often evoke fears and provoke anti-immigrant tensions in host countries. While the vast majority of migrants seek only to eke out a living or assimilate, some aid insurgents or actively participate in insurgencies. Trends and policies that influence migration, ethnic relations, separatism, and assimilation warrant closer study and more accurate data.

Aging and population decline. Some economists and demographers are alarmed by the purportedly deleterious effects of aging populations on social cohesion and economic prosperity. This is uncertain terrain; industrial countries are just beginning to grapple with the challenges of shrinking workforces and growing proportions of the elderly. So far, none of the aging countries has experienced unusual economic or political instability—including Russia, where the median age has risen to 38 and population is declining by around 1 million people (0.7 percent) annually (DaVanzo & Grammich, 2001). European countries with fast-growing Muslim minorities are most concerned with the decline of the native-born population; in these states, issues of national identity, religion, and culture are at stake—and thus tend to color the discussion of population decline, aging, and security (Savage, 2004).

High sex ratios (populations where men vastly outnumber women). In their new book, political scientists Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer (2004) use historical accounts to make the case that populations with a high sex ratio are more vulnerable to political unrest and

civil conflict. The authors focus on contemporary China and India, where sons are strongly preferred to daughters. As in other Asian countries, public access to ultrasound technology and amniocentesis has facilitated sex-selective abortion, resulting in highly skewed sex ratios. Separating the security-related effects of skewed sex ratios from those of the youth bulge and other demographic and social phenomena may prove difficult, but this provocative thesis, although speculative, should nonetheless stimulate further research.

Demography Is Not Destiny

For those involved in foreign policy, demographic changes can be viewed most constructively as challenges and vulnerabilities to the state and its institutions—or, in some instances, as options and opportunities. For example, when jobs are scarce, a large and growing youth bulge can lead to increased discontent, crime, and political unrest. States have responded in several ways to this stress: drawing young men into the military and internal security forces, exercising repressive controls, or promoting labor out-migration to industrial countries and facilitating remittances (savings sent home by foreign workers; Ware, 2003). However, when investment-driven job growth provides educated young adults with economic and social mobility, a youth bulge could provide a large group of taxable workers for the workforce. Similarly, high rates of urbanization often produce slum housing and inadequate services, increasing the risk of crime and civil unrest. Yet, where infrastructure investment accompanies urban growth, cities are significant sources of economic growth.

The demographic future is anything but certain; demographic trends are not immutable. That said, some aspects of population dynamics are clearly more susceptible to interventions. In the recent past, policies and programs have had enormous effects on childhood mortality and fertility, particularly in East Asia and the Caribbean. Population growth and decline are not as malleable; these trends are imbued with

momentum and thus difficult to reverse (save some enormous catastrophe or burst of migration) because past population dynamics have already established the size of the reproductive-age population for the next 15 to 20 years.

Next Steps for Policymakers

While the plethora of unresolved controversies and unanswered questions will no doubt drive further research in demographic security, the post-9/11 price for policy inaction and disengagement is extraordinarily high and will be measured in security crises, failed states, and lost human lives. Thus, we should ask: how can professionals in the diplomatic, military, and intelligence communities act, in a timely fashion, upon the results of demographic security research?

If our conclusions are true, then the responses are self-evident: U.S. foreign policy should improve girls' access to schooling and women's access to family planning, maternal health care, and income-generating opportunities. Improving women's status can influence social environments, help change cultural norms, and ultimately speed the demographic transition. Increasing women's participation in government, particularly in post-conflict negotiations, could help shift priorities away from armed confrontation and towards human development. The presence of high numbers of qualified women in important and visible diplomatic and military roles at home and abroad would also contribute to changing attitudes about women's roles.

To facilitate changes based on the security demographic, the national security community should make the demographic transition part of their global threat assessments and scenario exercises. Analysts should consider the security implications of trends in age structure, urban slum growth, rural landlessness, ethnic growth-rate imbalances, and other demographic factors. And, when asked to comment on the security implications of demography, analysts should remind policymakers of the programs already available in the "foreign aid toolbox"—



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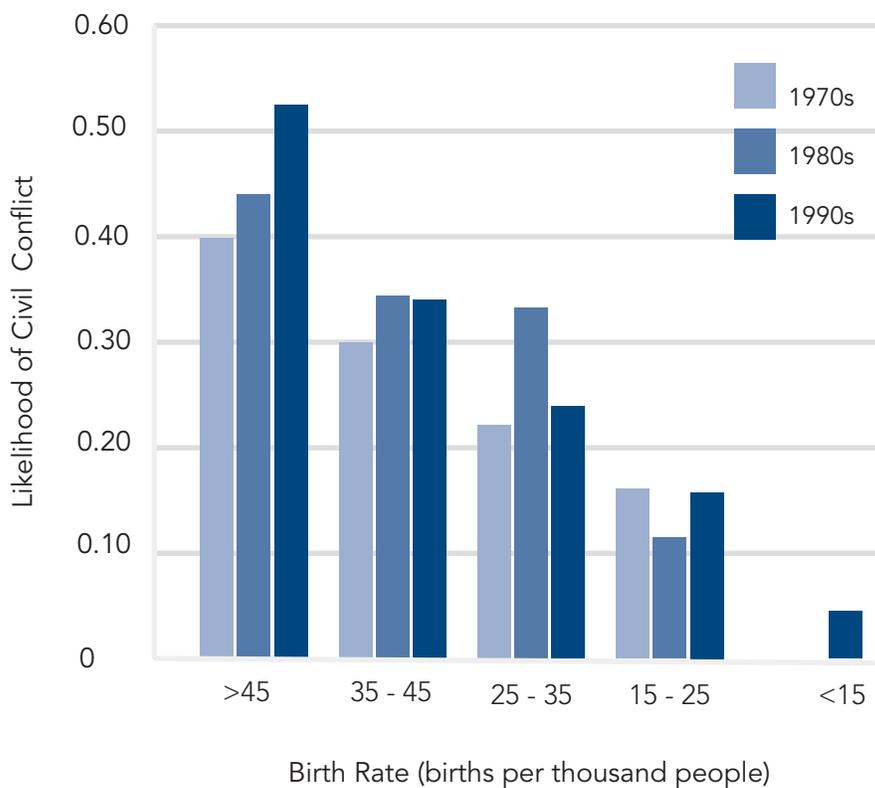


Figure 2. As countries' birth rates declined during the last three decades of the 20th century, their likelihood of civil conflict also tended to decline. While this relationship was most dramatic in the 1990s, it was also evident during the 1970s and 1980s, decades during which many civil conflicts were considered to be Cold War "proxy wars" (each side supported by one of the opposing superpowers). Source: Cincotta, Engelman, and Anastasion (2003)

namely, voluntary family planning services and girls' education—that promote positive demographic and social change.

Globally, the demographic transition is incomplete. One-third of all countries in the world remain in the early stages, with four or more children per woman. When the northern states of India are included, this population—the most conflict-affected in the world—comprises about 1.5 billion people (UNPD, 2003). Unfortunately, the demographic stresses endured by these countries are likely to receive less and less attention as the news media focuses instead on the industrial world's demographic issues: population aging, population decline, and immigration. The significant risks of delaying progress through the demographic transition, and the decades it can take to dissipate

those risks, underscore the need for donors and developing-country governments to increase financial and political support for policies and programs that lead to positive demographic changes: those that expand girls' educational opportunities, give couples the ability to choose the timing and frequency of childbirth, and increase women's participation in government and in the workplace.

Notes

1. For discussion of the database, see Gleditsch, Wallensteen, Eriksson, Sollenberg, & Strand (2002) and Wallensteen & Sollenberg (2001). To access the database, visit http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/UCDP/UCDP_toplevel.htm.

2. See also Urdal (2001), Goldstone (1991), and Moller (1967/68).

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