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Environmental Change and Security Program

The Graying of the Great Powers: Demography and Geopolitics in the 21st Century (Book Discussion)

Tuesday, January 27, 2009

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Edited Transcript—Jennifer Dabbs Sciubba

It's a privilege to talk today about the work being done at CSIS because you guys, as you know, have really led the way in keeping aging on the agenda of policy makers, kind of putting aging at the forefront. And that's something that I very much appreciate. And I think this book is likely to see similar success with policy makers. There are a lot of information here that they will find of use as they continue to think about the world and the future and what things they'll have to pay attention to as they make decisions.

I would like to speak today from both an academic and a policy standpoint because I think this book is relevant to both. It's a welcome addition to the literature, first of all. As far as I could figure out, I don't really think there's been a comprehensive book on demography and national security for about a decade, I don't think. At least not one of this quality. I think maybe [unintelligible] may have been the last one. So, in that sense, it's really good to bring the literature up to date, and just take stock of what's been going on in the last 10 years or so. Especially, a book 10 years ago might not have looked at something like aging in China, whereas today, that's much more at the forefront of our thoughts. And I think it's really relevant as well because you take an issue that's near and dear to the hearts of American security planners, and that is population aging. It's relevant not only because the U.S. is aging, but the major allies of the U.S. are aging as well. And so it's something that they certainly care about. So it's a little bit of a twist on our typical demography and security connection because it puts aging as the focus.

I think there are several strengths of the book. One is, as you mentioned, this discussion about the historical links between population and power. I learned so much from that. There were very interesting stories about the way people for centuries have thought about the importance of population. Another major strength, I think, are the discussions about fertility and population trends overall do a very thorough job of explaining to a layperson what those trends actually mean. And that's something that other books on demography don't



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necessarily do. For example, you talk about the assumptions behind the statistics. That's something we don't usually see. We read books about demography or articles about demography where we take the statistics they give us for granted. And those of us who know the assumptions behind them usually get all ruffled up. And I completely agree the ones that you chose. I think you made wise choices with the constant fertility and the high fertility for developing countries. And you explain why you chose those. That's a major strength.

As I mentioned, the book really brings us up to date with what's been happening. And I think it lays out a research agenda for ways we can look at the interaction between demography and security. But there are a few things I think that I come to different conclusions about. One of the major things is I think you're a bit over-competent in what you term your findings. So, the headline in bold at the end of the book is, "These are our findings about demography."

The beginning and middle of the book use that really strong language and that doesn't really match the middle of the book. The middle of the book shows all of the nuances behind the research, that there are maybe differing viewpoints on something and how you really came to your, I guess, not conclusions but your guesses about what's likely to happen in the future. But when we turn to the end of the book, it's captioned in much stronger language. Instead of such and such is likely to happen, it's that such and such will happen. And I think that disconnects and takes away from the really strong research that you did in the middle of the book.

And this is where it connects to policy for me as well. Policy makers like to know what we don't know and what we do know. And with population aging and national security, often there's a lot more of what we don't know than what we do know. That's because the literature is somewhat underdeveloped. Some reasons for that are because population aging is new. Some reasons for that is that people are just now paying attention to it. The literature on youth and conflict is much more developed than that of aging. But, I think, we can get around that. And I just want to suggest a couple of areas. We have states in the world that have been aging. And if we track at the same time their trends in the military, their economy and their politics, then we can start to see what's actually been happening instead of just having to guess what will happen in the future. And so to be able to take the past more and extrapolate out in the future then I think you can be a bit more confident with the findings.





So the one area I'll pick on is the one area, I'm kind of cheating, that I've done most of my research in, and that's social mood. So in the end of the book you talk about these big fears that we have and we hear this often, that population aging will lead older electorates to kind of hijack the political agenda, that as they become a larger part of the population, those few policies more in their favor. Well, when you really start to look at what's happened so far, we have Germany, Italy and Japan, for example, the three most aged states in the world. And we can track, as their populations have aged, what's been happening politically there? Have the older parts of the electorate been joining together and voting in huge blocks in their interests only? Have policies been skewing more to give them more money, exclude youth? That's actually not the case. As Germany, Italy and Japan have aged, policy makers in those states have realized, kind of, the consequences of previous political decisions that would be extremely generous in terms of health care and pensions, and have been scaling back.

Another thing is that it's not always just about reducing or raising the retirement age or reducing pension benefits, if you really begin to dig down into these countries, you see that, in Germany for example, I think it's something like 40 percent of men exit the work force through disability schemes, not retirement. So, there are a lot of different policy options, more so than just raising the retirement age. And changing the level of analysis a bit from this very high level of analysis where we talk about just developed countries, to individual developed countries and recognizing that the particular context matters, is important. As far as older electorates voting together, I found that in Germany and Italy, region is a much better indicator of a person's vote than their age. So, like a 65 year old in Bavaria, very different interests from a 65 year old in the north of Germany. So we don't really see this happening yet. It's not to say that we might not in the future, but I think it's important to actually see what's been happening so far in order to be a bit more competent in what we suggest for the future.

And I think this tells us, then, that institutions really matter. We sit here in the U.S. where AARP is one of the biggest influences on our government, some would argue. We certainly see them out there a lot. So we tend to, kind of, project that model on to the rest of the world. If aging matters here, it must matter in places where they're even more aged. But the United States is unusual because we give interest groups a major role to play in our policymaking. In other states, that's not necessarily the case. Even in Italy, the unions have been opposed by the government several times and that's kind of the closest model we have with interest groups. So, this context, this idea of institutions really matters, I think.





Secondly, I think we can use more nuance in our definition of aged. You do a great job of discussing what fertility means and you also introduce the discussion about life expectancy and some of the research that Max Plank, that Jim Vopel [spelled phonetically] and others have done in terms of extending life expectancy. And we know he thinks it's going to extend forever.

There's some new research by Wolfgang Lutz and other scholars that talks about -- or asks the question rather, "Was a 65 year old in the year 1900 really the same age as a 65 year old in the year 2000 or is there something different about age?" We tend to throw things out there like elderly. What does it mean to be elderly? What does it mean to be old? And what they do is they say that what if we defined age not by the year you were born but by how many years you have left in life. And it's an interesting thought. I mean, it's nothing I've used yet, but I think it's interesting for us in terms of policy to think backwards like that. As some of you may know, the most expensive year of life is the last year of life. That's where you really start to spend your money. That's where governments start to spend their money. So, thinking backwards gives you a different policy perspective and maybe opens up different options.

I think this nuance discussion of age is really necessary as well, but when we think about this phrase that so many of us use, old before rich. There's all this concern about countries that get old before they get rich. Well how does a 65 year old in the United States differ from a 65 year old in China or a lesser developed country. What kinds of things can we learn if we study places where people have maybe gotten old before the country's gotten rich. Some more studies on Eastern Europe and Russia, for example, might help us learn more about what could happen in China.

And, finally, I just want to talk a bit about how policymakers that I have seen, just in my limited experience, are likely to use this information. First of all, I think they'll love it because they love to learn about age. Robert Gates, as we know, has just been talking about Russia's declining population and the importance of that. And what the book does well is take stock of a range of issues for policymakers to consider. What I'd love to see more in the future is the way that these trends interact with other trends. There's some discussion in here about the environment, for example. I think that's the direction policy's moving at DoD at least, is looking at the way that demographic trends interact with other trends.





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And what factors would change your conclusions about aging? So I've talked a little bit about the need for maybe a sub national context, but what about a super national context? What about this global recession? Does that change any of your conclusions about aging? Or maybe a large scale international war. Or a trend in terrorism. Do any of those factors matter?

And lastly, I think, going into the future we need more of an emphasis on places where policymakers can make a difference, that opportunities matter just as much as challenges. And so, pointing out for them places for them that they can have a positive impact to mitigating the effects of trends are really important. But, I think it's an excellent book and thank you very much for the opportunity to sit here with you.



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