Demography and Instability in the Developing World

by Jennifer Dabbs Sciubba

Jennifer Dabbs Sciubba is an Assistant Professor of International Studies at Rhodes College.

Abstract: Demography provides a framework for analyzing the effect of population on national security and a tool to assess how demographic trends in the developing world will influence conflict over the next twenty years. Population is connected to national security as an indicator of challenge and opportunity, a multiplier of conflict and progress, and a resource for power and prosperity. This indicator-multiplier-resource framework is then applied to the three influential demographic issues of the developing world: (1) youthful populations; (2) transitional age structures; and (3) urbanization. These diverse demographic trends reveal a growing divergence among states in the developing world and the need to continue to plan for the spectrum of warfare, though there will be an increasing number of supportive and capable states.

Political demographers can no longer complain, as they have in the past, that no one pays attention to population trends. Everyone from prime ministers, to political pundits, to people on the street discuss the impact that retiring baby boomers will have on social security or the possibility that India’s growing population will catapult the country to superpower status. Policymakers and planners, too, have shown increasing interest in population. Yet all too often demography does not receive serious treatment when it comes to strategic assessment. Strategists have been convinced that population matters, but they do not necessarily know how best to include it beyond a few remarks about the future environment, nor how to weigh its impact alongside other important factors. In some ways, the limited role of demography in strategic assessment is understandable, as population data are often difficult to interpret and the causal chain linking population trends and security outcomes can be long. It is a challenge to find a systematic way of including demography among a host of interrelated trends, such as environmental or economic ones, especially when these trends interact.

But despite the difficulty, including demography is worthwhile for those who want to paint an accurate picture of the current or future security
environment. This article introduces a framework for analyzing population’s
effect on national security and applies this framework to assess how demo-
graphic trends in the developing world will influence conflict over the next
twenty years. Population is connected to national security as an indicator
of challenge and opportunity, a multiplier of conflict and progress, and a
resource for power and prosperity. Breaking down the analysis in this way,
rather than purely by demographic trend or by type of conflict, will help tease
out the pathways through which demographic trends create challenges and
opportunities. The indicator-multiplier-resource framework uses a compre-
hensive vision of national security, defined as a state’s ability to survive and
thrive by the absence of threat at the system, state, and individual levels of
analysis.

The indicator-multiplier-resource framework can be applied to what
are arguably the three most influential demographic issues affecting the
developing world: (1) youthful populations; (2) transitional age structures;
and (3) urbanization. Some of these trends create insecurity that results in
rebellion, protest, and crime. Others prepare conditions for increased prosper-
ity and peace, and thus increase security and capability for many states in the
developing world. The picture these diverse demographic trends reveal is one
that requires states to continue to plan for warfare, and respond to civil
conflict, instability, and humanitarian disasters. At the same time, these trends
also mean that there will likely be a greater number of capable states willing to
help with a response. The bottom line is that there is growing divergence
among states in the developing world both in demographic and conflict
patterns. Demographers have long written of the demographic divide between
the aging and shrinking Global North (which has been relatively peaceful and
democratic) and the youthful and growing Global South (which has been
relatively poorer and more tumultuous). This divide is no longer the only
relevant distinction. We are seeing the emergence of a second divide within
the developing world, and thus the emergence of a third category of states that
are growing older, more urban, more prosperous, more peaceful, and more
active in international affairs.

Some relevant demographic trends, e.g. youthful populations and the
growth of slums, are unique to the developing world, while others, e.g.
differential growth among ethnic and religious groups or migration, occur
in many different contexts around the world. What we learn from the indicator-
multiplier-resource framework is that population trends by themselves are
neither inherently good nor bad, but they do create conditions for either
internal peace or conflict to which states must respond. Depending on a state’s
ability to draw on its population resources, any population trend—including
growth, decline, or migration—could be either a challenge or an opportunity.
Whether the trend itself is unique or common, though, matters less for national
security than a host of other factors, including political capacity and policy
response. On the whole, developing countries have less political capacity than
do more developed states. They may lack legitimate and effective governance, infrastructure, and established institutions, for example, and thus frequently struggle to deal with the demographic challenges they face or conversely, they may take full advantage of their demographic opportunities. A caveat: the bonus of working-age population, which should be a major demographic opportunity, can be wasted if there are few job opportunities or if the population is in poor health or lacking skills and education. Policy response can be the major factor that determines whether a particular population trend is a bane or a blessing.

Youthful Populations and Instability

One of the biggest challenges least developed countries face is their young and growing populations. Ninety-six percent of world population growth between 2010 and 2030 will take place in less developed countries, including China.¹ These are often the states least equipped to handle the challenges of large-scale population growth, including job creation and governance. Several strategic states like Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have very young age structures. Though the rate of growth among this group of states varies due to their relative progress in lowering fertility, over 30 percent of the population of each state is under the age of 15, peaking in Afghanistan at over 46 percent. Such population growth challenges each country’s efforts at economic growth and governance at the advent of millions of young people over the next 20 years. Combined, these states will add 135 million people by 2030; Pakistan alone will add 61 million people (Table 1).²

On average, countries with young age structures have been about two and a half times more likely to experience civil conflict than states with more mature age structures.³ In addition, such states are less likely to experience

---

² Ibid.
democratic governance.\textsuperscript{4} Thus, demography challenges the ability of the United States to foster peace and security in the Middle East and Central Asia, a foreign policy goal.

The self-immolation of Tunisian street peddler Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010 is to great extent a story shaped by demography. This young man lit himself on fire after being repeatedly harassed by government officials as he tried to eke out a living selling fruits and vegetables. At 26, Bouazizi was part of one of the largest age cohorts in Tunisia—those aged 25–29—a generation squeezed more than previous generations. A youthful age structure creates the conditions for both poverty and insecurity at the individual level, and protest or rebellion at the societal level, because youth of large cohorts experience what demographers refer to as cohort crowding. They are crowded out of employment, in particular, because the economy cannot create enough jobs fast enough. Resentment builds from what Richard Easterlin calls the relative cohort effect.\textsuperscript{5}

Though most people expect that things will get better with time, in reality, today’s youth are worse off than their parents in some Middle Eastern countries. In Egypt, for example, the government used to guarantee public employment for all college graduates, but can no longer do so because of declining revenues and demographic pressure.\textsuperscript{6} In a 2009 Pew Global Attitudes survey, 50 percent of respondents ages 18–29 in Egypt said they thought children born today would be worse off than their parents.\textsuperscript{7} In many cases, the populations of Middle Eastern states are well educated—often with university degrees—but they have no prospect of parlaying their education into a meaningful career. Economic marginalization spills over into social marginalization. Because of the exorbitant cost of living, fewer than 50 percent of Middle Eastern men are married by their late 20s, compared with over 60 percent during the 1990s.\textsuperscript{8}

Many credit Mohamed Bouazizi’s death as the spark that ignited the wildfire of revolution that swept across the Middle East in 2011. But if his death was the spark, the region’s demography provided fodder for the flame. There are about 64 million other young men in the region, who are Mohamed’s age, many facing similarly dire circumstances.\textsuperscript{9} Often, demography helps establish


\textsuperscript{8} Silver, “Social Exclusion: Comparative Analysis of Europe and Middle East Youth.”

\textsuperscript{9} Division, “World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision Population Database.”
underlying conditions that lead to conflict, even if it is not the catalyst. Though there is diversity among the age structures of states in the Middle East—some are younger than others—youth in those states face similar situations. Tunisia’s median age is 29, and Yemen’s is a much younger 18, but in both countries young people are politically, economically, and socially marginalized. In these cases, the region’s demography is an indicator of potential conflict and a multiplier for other underlying social, economic, and political trends, setting the stage for conflict. There was no single factor behind the uprisings, but demography played a huge role.

Demography can also be a multiplier for developments positive to U.S. national security interests. Although for Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak and other ousted leaders, the outbreak of civil conflict was a national security threat to their regime, it is a positive development for their citizens if it leads to more representative governance. In this way, age structure can also be a multiplier for democracy. Political demographer Richard Cincotta reported that states have half a chance—literally 50 percent—of becoming a democracy once their proportion of youth declines to under 40 percent of the total population.10 What does this mean for today’s arc of revolution? The experience of Latin America may give us some hint. Many Latin American states transitioned to democracy before their age structures matured to Cincotta’s half-a-chance benchmark, but 60 percent of them have fluctuated between more and less free forms of democracy since the 1970s. Something similar may happen across the Middle East where demography may be one factor preventing consolidation of democracy in states with high proportions of youth: Egypt, Iran, and certainly Yemen. Using demographic trends as an indicator, it may be premature to interpret the Arab Spring revolutions as heralding a new era of democracy in the Middle East. According to Cincotta’s benchmark, Tunisia stands the best chance of becoming a free democracy because its 41 percent youth population will soon decline to below his “half-a-chance” 40 percent threshold; Libya is the next closest at 43 percent, Algeria at 45 percent, and Egypt at 46 percent.11

**Developing States and the Demographic Dividend**

States with young and old age structures are found throughout Europe and represent two ends of the spectrum, bookending the demographic transition from high to low fertility and mortality. But there are numerous states in the middle with transitional age structures. The East Asian economic miracle was in part fueled by this demographic dividend of lower fertility that led the Four Tigers, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, to have

---


higher proportions of working age citizens, than young or old dependents.\textsuperscript{12} To put it crudely, there were more people putting into the economy than taking out of it. This is another way demography can be a multiplier. Demography did not cause the economic miracle, but it was certainly a contributing factor, enhancing efforts to reduce government corruption and create investment. Economic resources have become the new currency of power in the postmillennial security environment, and transitional countries are best positioned to increase their economic resources.

States with transitional age structures not only have the opportunity for their own economic growth (which increases their own national security), but also to become stable and productive partners with other states in the international system. Aging states, in particular, should cultivate meaningful partnerships with younger states in the demographic window of opportunity because young states have the will and ability to increase global security. One example of a growing, and increasingly active, partnership of rising powers is IBSA—the partnership of India, Brazil, and South Africa.

India, Brazil, and South Africa all have transitional age structures, with relatively low proportions of elderly dependents, less than seven percent of the population in each case, and higher proportions of working-age populations. Fertility has fallen to under 2.5 children per woman on average in India and South Africa and the median age has risen to 25. Brazil’s fertility has already fallen below replacement level, and it now has a total fertility rate of 1.8 children per woman on average and a median age of 29.\textsuperscript{13} Each of these three states has done a fairly good job of taking advantage of its demographic bonus to the point where each has seen substantial economic growth. Concurrently, each has sought a greater role in international politics. The partnership among the three states grew out of a sense of marginalization from the world’s most powerful states, the latter which were viewed as carrying out their own global agendas, often without listening to the Global South. Since forming this partnership, IBSA has invested in reconstruction and aid projects in states like Haiti, Burundi, and Laos, allowing those struggling states an alternative to United Nations or bilateral aid from the most developed countries.

There are even more direct national security implications. Because of their strategic locations, were India, Brazil, and South Africa to solidify their positions as regional powers, each could help build much-needed stability in its respective region. They are already taking actions along these lines: India is patrolling the Gulf of Aden for pirates; South Africa has supported peace operations throughout Africa; and Brazil has been contributing around $4

\textsuperscript{12}David E. Bloom, David Canning, and Pia N. Malaney, “Demographic Change and Economic Growth in Asia,” in \textit{CID Working Paper} (Center for International Development at Harvard University, 1999), p. 3.

\textsuperscript{13}Division, “World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision Population Database.”

272 | \textit{Orbis}
billion a year in foreign assistance, an amount similar to Sweden and Canada. Together, they are representative of a new tier of rising powers. Some have questioned whether current global institutions, like the United Nations Security Council, can continue to operate by excluding these populous and successful states or whether it will become defunct. A strong case can be made that these institutions must reform or become irrelevant as rising powers with transitional age structures develop their own ways of institutional cooperation. The world is only beginning to see what states in this tier can accomplish.

Understanding the benefits and challenges of a transitional age structure is important because globally fertility is falling, with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa. Some of today’s youthful populations, like those in North Africa, will soon be entering their demographic windows of opportunity. Yet, a transitional age structure is no guarantee of success. The window of opportunity is just that—a chance in time when the transition from a young to mature age structure gives states the advantage to create economic growth, democracy, and civil peace. But failure to invest in the “quality” of the population, such as improving education and health, means squandering that opportunity. Some states in Latin America are facing this problem. Even India still has major problems with illiteracy and disease, and is not taking full advantage of its window. In fact, each of the three states of the IBSA partnership faces a major challenge to its continued economic growth and global power. India is limited by low life expectancy and low literacy rates, Brazil struggles with illicit drugs, and South Africa has a huge problem with HIV/AIDS.

Additionally, states have to prepare to become aged states during this transitional time. China is the example of a state that will soon be moving from a transitional age structure—where they are now—to an aged one. These states should try to avoid the difficult policy choices that today’s aged states, like those in Europe, are facing. They should establish sustainable pension schemes rather than relying on pay-as-you-go, which assumes that tomorrow’s elderly will be supported by today’s children. Chile instituted one of the world’s first private pension schemes and, in that sense, is better prepared for aging than many more economically advanced states. Overall, transitional age structure is a resource for the state, indicates potential for global security partnership and multiplies opportunities for economic growth and democratic governance.

**Urbanization**

The defining population trend of the 20th century was the increase in world population growth from 1.6 billion in 1900 to 6.1 billion in 2000, but the

---

defining trend of the 21st century will be the shift to an urban population. In 2008, for the first time, over half of the world’s population resided in urban areas. Urban areas bring increased opportunity for innovation because they bring people together in concentrated areas to share ideas. Urban populations often have greater opportunities for education, sanitation, and employment. From ancient Athens to contemporary New York City, Western countries have reaped the benefits of urbanization. In this century, now that mature states are mostly urban, it will be developing states that will reap the benefits of concentrated urban populations. This century will see more cities, larger cities, and a greater variety of urban experiences—some cities filled with thriving opportunities, but others marked by extreme poverty and overcrowding. Scale and scope are not the only changes. Another new phenomenon is the ability of these internal migrants to keep ties with their rural homes since travel and communication modes have improved. These changes present a host of national security issues, ranging from the vulnerability of urban areas as military targets, to regime insecurity caused by rural–urban fissures, to the spread of disease in urban slums. The large urban shift in the least developed countries means that there will be an increasing urbanization of poverty, because many, if not most, of these states lack the ability to provide for a burgeoning urban populace. However, these cities still provide greater opportunities for individual prosperity than do rural areas. Such opportunities at the individual level translate to benefits for the state—a way to increase national security.

In many countries, the cities contribute the most to the state’s economy. In high-income countries, cities generate 85 percent of the Gross National Product; in low-income countries, they generate about 55 percent. Tokyo alone accounts for 2 percent of global Gross Domestic Product. In Africa, large urban corridors are emerging that facilitate trade to the benefit of a wide population. The Ibadan–Lagos–Accra urban corridor has been called “the engine of West Africa’s economy.” East Africa, on the other hand, greatly lags and the UN does not project an urban transition there until the middle of the century, mostly because of antiquated policies that discourage rural-to-urban migration, and prevent economic transition away from agricultural dependence. Again, with urbanization, there is a divide—a growing divergence—within the developing world. The scope and scale of urbanization are overwhelming some of the least developed countries and some states are not urbanizing at all. Other states are reaping the benefits of urbanization, both at

---

17 Ibid., p. 20.
the individual and national levels, and increasing their own capacity and security thus spelling benefits for global peace.

One modern challenge is that the same thing that makes cities so attractive for people also makes them attractive as targets. Concentrating people, economic assets, and even bureaucracy in an urban area means that if that area is damaged through attack or natural disaster then the state’s economy, and even the world economy, can be severely damaged. Urbanization tends to occur in coastal areas, which increases the risk of natural disasters. The March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan caused an amazing amount of damage, but the speed and efficiency with which the Japanese government responded illustrates the importance of governance and political capacity. The same natural disaster in a crowded city of a developing state would have had a completely different outcome. Nor is the urban experience always a positive one. In many cases, the population of urban areas increases faster than the infrastructure can handle, leading to large populations with no access to clean water or sanitation. Disease can spread rapidly, causing insecurity on an individual level. Still, people keep moving to the cities rather than remaining in stagnant rural areas. Overall, this trend contributes positively to security in the developing world because the benefits of economic growth and individual opportunity outweigh the risks of concentrating assets.

But despite all of the benefits of urbanization, it can be a multiplier for conflict when it takes place in a context of environmental strain and causes inequality with rural areas. Nigeria provides an illustration of the connection between population growth, urbanization, and resource strains. During price hikes, labor unrest, strikes, and protests are common. As with rising food prices across Northern Africa, the deprivation related to population/resource imbalances is a factor in continuing civil unrest in Nigeria. Another destabilizing factor in Nigeria is that development is nearly impossible without the availability of reliable and affordable energy. The price of kerosene and cooking gas has risen by more than 1,000 percent in recent years and over 76 percent of Nigeria’s population relies on fuel wood as the main source of fuel for cooking.19 In addition, desertification caused by climate change, particularly in Northeastern Nigeria, is driving population migrations southward, as people seek arable land. One researcher found that “Exclusively land related conflicts and those that partially relate to land account for more than 50% of the communal clashes experienced in Nigeria from 1991 to 2005.”20 Thus, urbanization can multiply environmental strains and population-resource imbalances can trigger civil conflict.

Implications for U.S. National Security

Using the indicator-multiplier-resource framework, several conclusions about conflict trends in the developing world over the next twenty years can be drawn. A youthful age structure can clearly indicate potential conflict, providing planners another tool to determine potential hot spots. The United States already knows some of these hot spots since several strategic states will continue to have high fertility and young and growing populations; these states will be unstable for the foreseeable future. Experiences in the Middle East and North Africa show that, when combined with broader political, social, and economic analysis, demography helps us understand how a youthful age structure can multiply other trends, such as a stagnant economy, and play a role in conflict. On the positive side, youth can be a resource for democratic developments as they demand representative government. As states that have lowered fertility move closer to a transitional age structure, the likelihood of democratic governance increases. The West must remember, however, that the path to democracy is often a bloody one, so it may take these states years of struggle to achieve a more democratic and peaceful system.

Older, transitional age structures with higher proportions of working age men and women—a resource for the state—can multiply positive trends, such as transparent and capable governance, and can increase state power. This means that transitional age structures can also indicate possible partnerships. Countries looking for willing and capable allies should look to these rising powers. Finally, cities are a resource for increasing state power and can indicate potential for prosperity. But when accompanied by inequality and resentment, urbanization can multiply environmental strains and contribute to conflict.

In the future, the United States will likely be called on (or see the need) to respond to demographic-induced instability in developing countries. The three profiled demographic trends, plus trends with differential growth and migration, point to numerous challenges and opportunities for national security. What policies follow from these challenges? The first is that the global community should continue to support family planning to reduce population growth in areas where it is still well above replacement. Africa will see a near doubling of its population by mid-century, yet evidence from Nigeria shows that adding one year of female education reduces early fertility by 0.26 births. In most countries of the world there is a huge unmet need for family planning—215 million women desire access to family planning but do not have it. Education and the availability of contraception helps women

take control of their fertility, empowers them, and also benefits the state in terms of longer time females spend in the workforce.

Second, the United States should continue to maintain its relationships with long-time European allies, but should actively seek to cultivate new partnerships with states in the window of opportunity. In particular, the United States should support India as a potential Asian balancer to China and as a potential global security partner for addressing piracy and terrorism and distributing international aid. The United States should also cultivate stronger relationships in the Western Hemisphere with Latin American states, most of which are in the window of opportunity. By creating jobs in the formal economy, these governments will be able to counter illegal activities such as the drug trade. The United States should also continue to remain open to migration, which is keeping the United States from the same aging fate of many European states.

Demography will obviously be a huge driver of whether the world of 2050 has a population of 9, 10, or 11 billion people or whether 50, 60, or 70 percent of the population is urbanized, but also whether the world is more democratic, more innovative, more prosperous and more peaceful. Demography will be a huge driver of what shapes the future.