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# NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF POPULATION

KARL ZINSMEISTER\*

For nearly all of man's five thousand years of civilized existence, large populations were considered a strategic asset. Indeed, until the last hundred years, population was probably the single most important determinant of national power and security. As early as the ancient Greeks, technological and organizational innovations allowed advanced societies to dominate more numerous but less-developed societies, but only if the population differential was limited. Through most of history, no amount of technological progress could balance a gross population disadvantage. Furthermore, when competing societies maintained an approximately equal level of scientific and material advancement, population was often the determinant of national dominance. A large population has never been sufficient to guarantee great-power status, but it does appear to be one necessary precondition. In fact, every great power in history either had a relatively large population itself, or controlled the economic production and manpower of large populations subservient to the mother state. For all these reasons, it was generally accepted through all but the last two centuries that population growth enhances national power and security.

## I.

In 1798 this view first came under sharp challenge. In that year, the Reverend Thomas Malthus published his *Essay on the Principles of Population*. In it he explained that population increases geometrically, and he argued that because there is a limited amount of land available for cultivation, the agricultural and other production that supports a population will be unable to keep pace. When the rapidly increasing line of population meets the line of resource availability, Malthus claimed, population level will be dampened by "positive checks." These include famine, disease, and war. When a population reaches a saturation point on the land that supports it, that population will aggressively reach out for more land, which will lead to war. War, in turn, will produce fatalities—reducing population—and perhaps fresh lands, which could support future or transplanted population.

Malthus, through this work, became a prominent exponent of the idea that population growth is a likely cause of war. We now know, as Malthus himself began to suspect in his later writings, that the availability of land and other national resources is by no means fixed, but is subject to constant expansion

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through technical advance and improved economic productivity. We also know that Malthus underestimated man's ability to take control of population growth by means other than the positive checks of war, disease, and famine. For example, Malthus considered universal practice of birth control to be both immoral and impracticable. He did not foresee its widespread application.

Although Malthus' theory has not withstood the test of time, his spirit has nonetheless insinuated itself deeply into the modern mind. Following the Malthusian diagnosis, national demagogues have used population as both a scapegoat and a justification for international violence. Before World War II, German politicians claimed that Germany was overcrowded within its existing borders and used population pressures as a pretext for expansion. That claim does not stand up well in light of Germany's postwar experience, where the Bundesrepublik, despite losing one-third of its territory and gaining a 25 percent population increase via massive refugee influx from East Germany, experienced a prolonged economic boom.

Nonetheless, the argument is seductive. As Harold Cox has written: "As soon as a population grows big, its leaders say, 'Our people are so numerous we must fight for more space.' As soon as war has taken place, the leaders invert this appeal, and say: 'We must breed more people in preparation for the next war.'" Recognizing this tendency to rationalize conquest on demographic grounds, Quincy Wright stresses that the historical record shows "population situations and changes are never necessary causes of war."

Elsewhere in his classic exposition of the causes of war, Wright states that it is not population change itself that spurs violence, but "the willingness of people to accept unsound economic theories" as to population's effects. For example, if one subscribes to the belief that the world economic pie is largely fixed in size, any period of population increase will induce the alarming thought that maintaining current living standards will require wresting resources away from one's neighbors. A more balanced understanding of the relationship between population and economics, on the other hand, leads to the realization that there are many alternatives to violence open to countries with growing populations. These include intensification of agricultural production, increased urbanization, increased industrialization, expanded foreign trade, and emigration, as well as others.

It is important to understand, however, that population increase does require adaptation and adjustment by nations, and that if a country's benign responses to growth are thwarted, it may resort to aggressive behavior. For example, the United States and its Western Allies may bear some blame for Japan's drift toward militarism and foreign adventure in the early twentieth century. Japan's densely concentrated population grew rapidly from about 32 million in 1850 to 75 million just before World War II. Yet emigration and expanded foreign trade—two of the classic responses to the economic demands of population growth—were increasingly closed off to Japanese leaders by Western protectionist trade barriers and Oriental-exclusion immigration laws.<sup>1</sup> That Japan

1. It is worrisome to consider that protectionist legislation and measures to constrict im-

eventually turned to imperial conquest as a solution to its perceived overcrowding is partly a result of short-sighted Western policies.

## II.

Despite its obvious strains, population growth can produce clear benefits to both national power and international peace. Population pressures, while causing short-run turmoil, force innovations and productivity-enhancing changes that enrich the nation. Population growth can sharply quicken the pace of industrialization and break down social rigidities. The remarkable growth in industry and technical progress that occurred in the United States, Germany, Russia, and Japan around the turn of the twentieth century may have been directly related to their high population growth. Conversely, the less spectacular economic expansions in France and Italy may be partly related to their more sluggish demographic change.<sup>2</sup>

Nothing exists in U.S. history to indicate that rapid population growth is incompatible with rapid economic expansion. After all, the population of the U.S. went from 2.5 million in 1776 to 240 million today,<sup>3</sup> while Gross National Product (GNP) per capita increased 15-fold. Indeed, Alvin Hansen has suggested that perhaps two-thirds of the growth of U.S. economic output up until WW I was caused by population growth, either directly through increases in labor supply, or indirectly through the productivity enhancements of mass production. And, if population and economic output per person can be increased simultaneously, the result will be a sharp increase in national power and influence.

Likewise, the *international* results of growing population need not be negative. The alleged relationship between Western population growth and subsequent overseas colonization does not exist upon careful examination. For example, France, a leading imperialist nation, had one of the slowest-growing populations in Europe throughout its colonial epoch. Population growth can, in truth, contribute to international peace and security because of the accelerated international communication, travel, migration, trade, and generally increased cultural interpenetration it brings. In fact, three periods when the world's population increased most rapidly—the Roman era, the nineteenth century, and the post-WW II period—correspond with the Pax Romana, the Pax Britannica, and the Pax Americana.

## III.

There is, then, no determinate relationship between population dynamics and international conflict. Nonetheless, aspects of population change can create

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migration once again enjoy wide support today. Congressional bills mandating each may well be enacted before the end of the year.

2. This view is associated with Nobel Prize-winning economist Simon Kuznets, among others.

3. Calculations by W.S. Rossiter suggest that half of today's population was produced through natural increase by the 2.5 million original settlers here at the time of the American Revolution. The rest are newer immigrants and their descendants.

security tensions within and between nations. One such aspect is differential growth between ethnic groups. Evidence exists that as early as 25 B.C., commanders in the Roman army were carefully mixing and observing the various non-Roman communal groups that made up an increasing portion of their military. Subjugated peoples often become important parts of imperial armies, for example, Italians in Rome, Cossacks in the Russian Tsarist cavalry, Kurds in the Middle East, Punjabs and Gurkhas in the British Indian army. Some of these ethnic groups became prized for their martial abilities and, like the British Gurkhas or the Bedouins in Jordan's armed forces, continue to serve prominently in national armies.

More often, though, minorities and outside ethnic groups are considered to have a negative effect on national security. Throughout British military history there were concerns about the loyalty of Irish and Scots troops. The British naval mutinies of the late 1700s were perceived to be part of an Irish conspiracy. In the 1740s there were mutinies in Scotland. In 1921 the Connaught Rangers, stationed in India, mutinied out of sympathy with Irish rebels.

It is not just within military units that such problems arise. Disproportionate rates of reproduction among ethnic groups within a country can create problems for national unity and thereby for national security. Ethnic and religious differences, combined with the fear of one group demographically swamping another, are the primary obstacles to Irish unification and the source of the extended violence in Northern Ireland. Spanish Basques, Indian Sikhs, Sri Lankan Tamils, Moros in the Philippines, Kurds in Iraq and Iran, and other groups have sometimes been the center of national disputes, endangering security. Africa is rife with often bloody struggles between competing tribal and other population groups. Although ethnic schisms within the Belgian and Canadian populations have not resulted in violence, they include language, cultural, and religious differences that have produced serious problems.

The Canadian situation is of particular interest. The growth of the French-speaking population in Canada is a classic example of the leverage that differential birth rates can exert. In 1700 there were only about ten thousand French-Canadians in Quebec. Families, however, tended to be extremely large. Without benefit of further French immigration, the original French-Canadian population expanded to more than a million by the 1870s. At that time they constituted approximately 30 percent of the population. The French minority was disaffected with British rule in Canada, and their attempt to extend their power bloc and exert influence by demographic means became quite conscious. It was referred to as the "revenge of the cradle." During the First World War, the Canadian political system and military were severely strained by resistance by the French-speaking community to conscription and by controversy over whether French-Canadians were contributing fully to the war effort.

As the French-Canadian example suggests, the effect of demographic dynamics on national security is not one-way. Just as demographics influence national security, so too can a security threat influence demographics. One of the best examples of this phenomenon is seen today in Israel. With a Jewish

fertility rate of 2.7 children per woman, Israeli family size is well above the level of other comparably developed nations. The birth rate of Israeli Jews is also much higher than that of Jews living in developed countries outside the Middle East. The siege mentality that has arisen after three major wars in thirty-five years and the perceived need to bolster the state's Jewish population in light of that situation are factors that contribute to the relatively high rates of reproduction of Israel's Jews. (Similar factors may explain the very high birth rate of Israel's resident Palestinians—6.4 children per woman.)

Another country with interesting ethnic demographics is the Soviet Union. The various constituent nationalities within the USSR have sharply different fertility rates, with important national security implications. After the Bolshevik Revolution, three-quarters of the Soviet population was Russian. Today, less than 50 percent is Russian. In the future, that fraction will shrink even more. This is a result of two divergent trends: the low birth rates of Russians (two children per woman), and the extremely high birth rates of Soviet Asians in the Moslem republics (4-5 children per woman). Radio Liberty-overseer Ben Wattenberg reports that Soviet Asians privately refer to this as "victory in the bedroom."

At least two-thirds of the non-Russian population is not fluent in the Russian language. About 90 percent of the Soviet officer corps is Russian, but the rank-and-file soldiers necessarily reflect the ethnic composition of the population at large. Even if Russian Red Navy commanders succeed in training Uzbek conscripts to operate a submarine below polar ice, one can be sure that reduced military cohesiveness will result from the growing ethnic divisions within the Soviet armed forces.

Leaders in the Soviet Union and other multiethnic countries express hope that over time, universal education, mass communication, and other homogenizing influences of modern life will erase ethnic distinctions and rivalries. This, however, has not been the recent global experience. Ethnic identifications have shown remarkable vitality and have often seemed to acquire new force from precisely those aspects of modernity that were supposed to dissolve them. The Iranians are only one group who reacted to the standardizing influences of modern life by strongly reasserting the distinctive aspects of their national culture.

Sometimes, a population's ethnic identity may endure, and even deepen, over time by mutating creatively. As Cynthia Enloe has pointed out, there are fascinating examples from recent history that suggest that modern political conditions can lead to the establishment of fundamentally new ethnic forms, which transcend or blend other tribal, religious, or regional identifications. Blacks in South Africa, for example, are a diverse group who have only recently begun to think of themselves as a united group, in response to their common opposition to white minority rule. Likewise, Sephardim in Israel come from a wide range of nations and backgrounds, and they have only begun to define themselves as a bloc in the last few decades, in contraposition to Israel's Ashkenazi. It was not until the Ibo and Hausa were established as competing factions in modern-day Nigeria that they reached their current level of ethnic

solidarity. Likewise, Rwanda's Hutu are a relatively recent ethnic amalgam, growing up in response to new demographic and political conditions.

#### IV.

Ethnic and religious groups can be expected to remain important factors in the development of national unity and in the protection of national security and international peace. But, of course, for countries and for ethnic groups within countries, numerical strength is only one aspect of power. Former CIA Deputy Director Ray Cline has devised a formula for rating the international power and influence of nations. This formula suggests that population size per se does not contribute more than 10 percent to the total power quotient. Population's overall importance, however, is much greater because of its secondary effects on economic and military strength, the other material variables in Cline's formula.

Larger populations produce larger GNPs, and brute economic production is a critical aspect of national strength and security. Larger and denser populations also can more easily build the infrastructure of industry, transport, communications, all of which support national defense in some ways. Power is, in some ways, related to the number of railroad cars, cyclotrons, hospitals, electric plants, and universities a nation possesses. Additionally, only larger populations have tax bases broad enough to support the construction of aircraft carriers, submarines, and missile defense systems. Further, attaining technological leadership requires collecting a large critical mass of scientists, and only a substantial consumer market can support broad industrial innovation and a major research and development sector. In none of these areas is a large population alone enough to produce success, but in each instance, a bigger nation may have a strategic advantage.<sup>4</sup> In fact, demographer Kingsley Davis has suggested that no nation without a large population can hope for great-power status. The advantages of a large labor force, the economies of scale and production, and a big army are simply too important.

The benefits of large or increased population accrue most clearly to nations that are already developed. But even very poor or disorganized large nations must be taken seriously in global calculations of power. China and India, for example, both have per capita GNPs of under \$300, but because of their hordes of soldiers, the aggregated size of the economic production, and the difficulty of subduing such large populations through invasion, they are accorded national power completely out of proportion to their level of development.<sup>5</sup>

4. It should be acknowledged that in some cases, there may be countervailing disadvantages; for example, increased social pressures, environmental stress, and possible economic problems (such as labor oversupply), to go with the national security benefits of expanded population. Deciding whether an extra increment of population is an asset or a liability depends on each nation, and sometimes on whether the matter is viewed from the collective or the individual perspective. This paper, however, must generalize for most nations and is concerned only with population's *power and security* effects, judged from the national interest.

5. One of the clearest indications of this is the Soviets' positioning of more than fifty troop divisions on or near the Chinese border.

The experience of the U.S. Civil War illustrates that a larger population and stronger economic base can contribute a great deal toward overpowering superior military prowess. Likewise, America's logistical advantage over the Japanese, calculated at 10 to 1 by the Japanese, outweighed disadvantages of surprise and preparation in the Pacific during World War II. Clearly, modern military technology can go a long way in helping compensate for an inferior population level, as the Israelis—a nation of 4 million surrounded by more than 100 million hostile or potentially hostile neighbors—have demonstrated. It must be remembered, however, that if not for the special nature of its relationship with the United States, a nation as small as Israel would never be able to afford the sophisticated weapons that are the only thing between its trim fighting force and destruction. The United States provides Israel with credits and subsidies of several billion dollars per year—nearly \$1,000 per Israeli citizen. Even so, the Israelis must still devote 30 percent of their GNP to defense. Israel, therefore, can hardly be taken as a general model for overcoming the national security disadvantages of low population.

Besides, most nations cannot assume they will have a technological advantage over their rivals, and when industrial standing is similar, population level becomes a vital differentiator of national power. It can be extremely destabilizing when traditional competitors suddenly enter onto divergent demographic paths. The French certainly felt that the balance of power was shifted fatally against them when their population dramatically slowed its growth in the late nineteenth century, while that of their European competitors continued upward. France went from a position of considerable advantage over the British, the Germans, and the Austro-Hungarians to being inferior in size to all three by the early 1890s. This period of demographic decline corresponded closely with the fall of French national power and influence. Similarly, the Germans felt considerably disadvantaged because of their failure to keep pace with the growth of the Russian population.

## V.

Today, the most striking demographic asymmetry with global-power implications involves the Soviet Union and the United States. The Soviets, with low birth rates in the European republics, high birth rates in the Asian republics, and a moderately high net result, have substantial population growth ahead. At current rates, the Soviet Union will go from a population of 275 million people to a population of close to 400 million by the end of the next century. At the same time, the U.S.—at current rates—will crest and then decline to about 260 million, not much higher than today's 240 million. Most important, because the U.S. has had below-replacement-level birth rates for more than a decade, it will then be shrinking from its 260 million base at the rate of about half a million per year. (It takes 2.1 children per couple to keep a population stable. The U.S. now averages 1.8 children per couple, 15 percent below that minimum level.) The two superpowers will go from a position of rough population parity to a 3-to-2-and-growing Soviet advantage.

The effect of the shift, if it comes to pass, is impossible to predict, but



it will be to the American disadvantage.<sup>6</sup> One of the most likely national security effects would be the reinstatement of the draft. The Soviet Union has had a draft since World War II. It allows them to pay their 4.5 million soldiers an average of only a few dollars per month. The United States had a draft from 1939 to 1973. In 1973 the U.S. armed forces totaled 2.3 million persons. Today there are 2.1 million volunteers in the American military. Recruits are attracted by salary and payments comparable to incomes in the private sector of the U.S. economy, making expenses necessarily quite high.

The American military now totals about 7.6 percent of men aged 18 to 30. Because of low U.S. birth rates, by 2085 a military the same size as today's would consume 10.2 percent of available American men aged 18 to 30. That is a 35 percent increase. In order to achieve that larger share, the U.S. will either have to institute a fairly large draft or raise military pay to levels high enough to lure enlistees from the private sector. That would mean a sharp increase in defense spending (personnel costs currently comprise approximately two-thirds of the defense budget).

The alternative to a large draft or high defense budget is to maintain armed force levels at the same fraction of the 18- to 30-year-old male population as today. In that case, the United States' total armed forces would fall to 1.6 million. And, of course, if the United States wanted to *match* the strength of the then-much-larger Soviet Union (with a military force of between 6 and 7 million), it would probably need *both* a draft and enormous increases in defense spending, in sum, a permanent militarization of American society.

In Roman times, below-replacement birth rates and the fear of national security consequences led Caesar to award bounties to large families and stirred Emperor Augustus to issue the Lex Julia and the Lex Papia, a remarkable series of pronatalist edicts. Population decline also possibly contributed to the decay of the Greek and Venetian empires. Barring an increase in the birth rate, perhaps in tandem with expanded immigration, this may also become a serious problem for American national security.

6. Just the same, it should be pointed out that the Soviets have population problems of their own. In addition to the ethnic strains outlined above, these include high levels of family breakup, growing juvenile delinquency and crime, an extremely high abortion rate in the European republics (more than six per woman per lifetime), poor regional distribution of population, and endemic alcoholism (cited in more than half of all divorce petitions). Many of these problems can have negative effects on health, worker productivity, and ultimately national security. For example, alcoholism has become so rampant that it has actually led recently to sharp drops in national life expectancy, an unprecedented occurrence for a modern developed country.