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Population

**Asia-Pacific Demographics in 2010–2040:
Implications for Strategic Balance**

Nicholas Eberstadt

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines the prospective impact of demographic changes on the strategic balance in Asia.

MAIN ARGUMENT:

Over the coming decades, the demographic profiles of the major powers of the Asia-Pacific region—China, India, Japan, Russia, and the U.S.—stand to be transformed significantly. Impending changes will directly affect the ability of these states to augment power and extend influence internationally. The strategic balance will be affected not just by changes in human numbers but by changes in human resource profiles (health and educational patterns) that bear on economic productivity and thus on military potential.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

- As the trend lines vary widely across the Asia-Pacific's major powers, important shifts in relative potential may be in store for these states in the coming generation. Demographic trends portend serious relative economic decline in Russia, severe complications for the prospect of "China's rise," relative economic decline for Japan, a relatively positive outlook for India, and, comparatively speaking, the most auspicious fundamentals for the U.S.
- Moscow and Beijing, in particular, do not yet seem to appreciate the extent to which demographic constraints conflict with their current international strategies—a disjuncture that could lead to unpredictable changes in their external behavior.
- For the U.S., the main strategic demographic challenges appear to be contending with questions of domestic human resources, including education and health, and dealing with the impending demographic decline of strategic allies. Unfolding demographic trends underscore the importance of extending the U.S. alliance structure to new states that share U.S. interests and affinities.

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Demographic trends gradually but relentlessly alter the realm of the possible, not only for individual human beings but also for the societies they constitute and the states that represent them. The impact of population trends on state capabilities—on the capacity of governments to augment power and exercise influence internationally—is manifest not only through alterations in raw demographic totals (changes to overall population structure through patterns of births, deaths, and migration) but also through the changing characteristics and socio-economic profiles of the children, men, and women who compose the national populations in question. This chapter will examine the prospective role that demographic trends may play in Asia and the Pacific in shaping new constraints on, and opportunities for, the major powers of the region in the decades ahead.¹

The horizon for this analysis will extend out three decades to the year 2040. The reason that this chapter may dare offer demographic projections over such an extended horizon is simply this: the overwhelming majority of people that will be living in the major states of the Asia-Pacific region 30

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¹ In a century that effectively commenced with the September 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington, any observer of international affairs must be alert to the role that nonstate actors now play in the international arena. Even so, state actors still dominate the friendly and sometimes unfriendly competition that takes place on the global chessboard, and the primacy of states in establishing the contours of the international security environment is unlikely to be replaced any time soon.

years hence are already alive today and living in those countries now.² Such projections obviously do not and cannot make any provision for cataclysmic upheavals or disasters in the years ahead. Further, it is important to recall that more prosaic but nonetheless consequential demographic surprises have occurred with some regularity in the past—both in Asia and elsewhere; though unforeseen at present, more of these surprises no doubt lie in store in the coming decades. The point, however, is that demographic projections today can afford a reasonable approximation of the population profiles of the major countries in the Asia-Pacific region 30 years hence. These prospective demographic profiles can be highly informative about the coming pressures on economic performance as well as on such essential but largely incalculable factors as social cohesion and the perceptions and calculations of national leadership—and thus, by extension, on prospective relative changes in state capacities for competition on the international stage.

The projections outlined in this chapter point to some dramatic prospective changes for the population profiles of the region's major states in the decades immediately ahead. These transformations will be difficult to mitigate in any appreciable measure, will be all but impossible to forestall entirely, and could have a major influence on the relative capabilities of state actors to engage in sustained international strategic competition.

This chapter proceeds through five sections. The first briefly considers the general impact of national population trends on state capacities for augmenting power and extending international influence. The second section provides an overview of key demographic trends for Asian and selected additional countries over the past generation, as well as the outlook for the decades immediately ahead. The third offers a summary review of the demographic trends altering the realm of the possible for five major powers of the Asia-Pacific region: China, India, Japan, the Russian Federation, and the United States. The fourth section compares prospective demographic trends for these five states in three realms that may have special bearing on relative national power: military-age manpower, working-age manpower, and highly trained manpower and “knowledge production.” The final section offers an overall assessment of, and some tentative conclusions

² Given the relatively low birth and death rates currently prevailing throughout the region, current projections suggest that people living in India as of 2010 will still account for roughly three-fifths of the country's total population in the year 2040; for China and the United States, the corresponding fraction will be closer to two-thirds; for Russia, perhaps 70% or more; and in Japan, that fraction could be close to three-fourths. Here, as elsewhere in this study, I rely heavily on the UN Population Division (UNDP), “World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision,” <http://esa.un.org/unpp/index.asp>; and the U.S. Census Bureau, International Data Base, <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idb/>. The U.S. Census Bureau produces a single projection for the countries it analyzes; unless otherwise indicated, all references to UNDP projections cite medium-variant projections.

about, the manner in which demographic trends may shape the strategic balance in Asia in the decades ahead.

Assessing the Influence of Population on National Power

In long-term geopolitical competition, a country's population surely matters—but just how much? The seeming precision of national population counts and other demographic statistics may convey the illusion that the role of the population factor in international affairs can be correspondingly calculated with regularity and exactitude, but this simply is not so. Though population trends can help us understand some of the complex pressures that bear on the international strategic balance and states' potential for exerting influence abroad, at the end of the day the assessment of the role of population in shaping the strategic environment remains more of an art than a science. Mechanistic or deterministic readings of the population factor in world affairs are unwarranted—and even worse, are likely to mislead.

At the simplest of levels, many observers of geopolitics casually seem to subscribe to the proposition that “there is strength in numbers.” It is surely unobjectionable to suggest that in the modern era a relatively large national population seems to be a necessary precondition for attaining great-power status.³ Additionally, differentials in population growth are commonly (though not always explicitly) believed to affect the balance of power between nations and even entire regions. There are numerous historical examples that would appear to reaffirm this notion: perhaps most famously, the Franco-Prussian rivalry in the nineteenth century. Over that long period, Germany not only out-peopled France but also displaced France as Europe's predominant continental power. Germany's relatively rapid demographic growth may well have counted as an advantage in Berlin's contest against Paris, but population trends were hardly the only quantity that was tilting the balance between these two states over those generations. Indeed, given all the other critical non-demographic factors in play during those years, it is not at all self-evident that demographics were a necessary, much less sufficient, condition for Berlin's ascendancy over Paris.⁴

³ This precondition is famously suggested, for example, by Katherine Organski and A.F.K. Organski, *Population and World Power* (New York: Knopf, 1961).

⁴ To mention just a few of the most obvious additional factors: the unification of Germany under Prussian governance; the florescence of German higher education, science, and technology; the industrial-chemical revolution that underpinned Germany's burst of industrialization; the transformation of German banking and public finance; and the advent of a world-class cadre of strategists in the Prussian General Staff whose members devised and implemented a nineteenth-century “revolution in military affairs.” See Nicholas Eberstadt, “Demography and International Relations,” *Washington Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 33–52.