Demographics and conflict

by Nazli Choucri

CONFLICT AND population are strongly interrelated, and the linkages go both ways. Under certain conditions population variables lead to conflict, and under other conditions the existence of conflict can have profound impacts on demographic characteristics. Yet these links are seldom simple or direct, and they are modified by intervening processes.

The term "population" is often used as a shortcut to refer to population size and/or rates of change. These two facets of demographic characteristics, however, are often less illuminating when considering the relation of population to conflict. The distribution of populations — in terms of internal and external mobility or their locations — and their composition — age, ethnicity, and so forth — are facets of demographic structure which, combined with other variables, can influence conflict both within and between nations. "Conflict," in turn, refers to complex social processes ranging from benign competition to overt violence.

One must begin with the recognition that humans are critically dependent on their physical environment. Humans have certain basic biological needs which place increasing demands on resources as population grows. The technology available to render these resources serviceable brings about environmental and social change. The more advanced the technology available to a society, the more varied the types and kinds of resources needed. Demands are likely to increase as technological advances change social perceptions of needs. Technological advances, therefore, influence and alter economic activity, as well as political institutions and processes.

Increases in population, in conjunction with developments in technology, contribute to the familiar dilemma of rising demands and insufficient resource availability. Scarcity, however, is not determined by numbers alone, but by the relationship of people to assets, and to the technology needed to employ those assets. These factors provide the basis for perceptions of threat and the belief that interests must be protected. Population, resources, and technology may combine to generate activities outside territorial borders, or lateral pressure, which may lead to conflict.

The Malthusian thesis, elegant in its simplicity, traces the origins of want, misery, and war to the relationship between population and resources. The proposition that

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population increases geometrically, but subsistence increases only arithmetically, and that the "power of population" is infinitely greater than the earth's power to sustain humanity provides a basis for linking population to war. In these terms, war is an involuntary act — a necessity — dictated by the strain of population against limited resources.

Marxists, however, negate this premise by defining the problem in terms of distribution: if resources were properly distributed, the entire population of the world could subsist upon existing resources. The concept of excess population is denied in principle, as is the logical necessity of pressures culminating in war. But Marxists accept the Malthusian rationale when it applies to capitalist societies. Lenin's contribution to the debate, "imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism," placed war as a necessary consequence of the capitalist mode of production. Recent extensions of Marxist arguments trace political conflict to population variables, but these stem less from the original debate than from a radical reaction to international developments since World War II.

In spite of their differences, the emphasis of both lines of thought is upon the problem of relatively increased numbers of people drawing upon relatively decreased or poorly distributed resources. The interactive effects of these forces define the Malthusian thesis, and its Marxist critics interject human volition and social engineering as ways to modify this interaction.

THE HISTORICAL record, however, provides further bases for drawing conclusions about the relationship between population and conflict. On the basis of historical statistical analysis, a number of conclusions can be drawn.

• *The links between population and conflict are complex.* While demographic factors are often instrumental in leading to conflict within and between states, the link is not a simple one — more people, more conflict. Resource scarcity is often a factor pushing populations to conflict. But if the technological capability to exploit resources is not available, this "push" is not likely to take place. If resource scarcities persist, however, conflict will eventually result, although the effect is again reduced as scarcities lead to actual starvation and human weakening.

The relationships between population density and violence are more evident on individual and community levels than between nations. In the latter case, this relationship is mediated by the significant intervening factors of technological capability and resource availability. Studies of the origins of World War I in Europe and of the Japanese involvement in World War II, for example, point to the significant role of population in leading to resource demand

which, when combined with technological capability, leads to competition among nations, and, eventually, to war.

• *Conflict affects demographic characteristics.* The globe abounds with examples of conflict influencing population. The creation of refugees is a result of violence. It is difficult to gauge the total number of refugees in the world, since transborder flight is often unrecorded. The U.N. figure of 10 million officially recognized refugees, as of January 1985, and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*'s 1984 figure of 40 million refugees cumulatively since World War II must both be viewed as gross underestimates. Genocide, the systematic eradication of a population, is the most dramatic manifestation of the effects of violence on population.

• *Conflict politicizes population.* In the presence of conflict, demographic characteristics become construed as political ones and, for all practical purposes, enter as political variables in the power calculations of antagonists. Lebanon is a case in point. Conflict developed as a result of perceived, and actual, differences in demographic characteristics of contending groups: rapid Muslim growth rates threatened the Christians. The Christians preferred violence to the possibility of becoming politically dominated by their rivals; surrounding regional conditions and insecure borders aggravated the situation.

Demographic characteristics thus both initiate and perpetuate conflict and, to the extent that violence persists, the dissolution of the political system becomes imminent. Lebanon, a country with a long history of communal peaceful coexistence now faces prospects of state dissolution. Unfortunately, it is not a unique case.

• *Ethnicity is a predominant variable influencing international conflicts.* A recent study of 307 post-World War II conflicts identified ethnic differences as a significant determinant of violence.[1] Ethnicity is the framework within which differences in population size, density, growth rates, and so forth are accorded political importance. The future character of the state of Israel, where Arab growth rates are higher than Jewish rates, is of concern to those who believe in the sanctity of Israel's Jewish character. Other states such as Malaysia and Yugoslavia are also concerned about their essential character and their vulnerability to evolving demographic realities.

• *International migration creates political tensions.* Often conflict is not immediate but takes shape as the flow of population consolidates its position in the recipient communities and "nativist" reactions set in. In countries whose social parameters are shaped by immigration, institutional responses become important. To the extent that they fail to take into account new demands by new immigrants, local conflicts emerge, although persisting malaise is almost inevitable, since it is impossible to respond to all demands from all sources.

This strain is particularly evident in the United States, a society which has been built by and has benefited from international migration. Each new influx of immigrants, many resulting from international conflicts in which the United States was involved, has placed new demands on the social and political systems. It remains to be seen whether the latest waves of immigration from the south will continue to be accommodated, or whether nativist reactions and strained social services will result in conflict.

Other factors, such as the age structure of a population—younger populations with higher resource demand and unemployment are more prone to violence—and population control policies themselves, if they are perceived to be unfair or if they lead to rapid social change, can link population variables to conflict. By the same token, efforts to regulate population flow across national borders can also lead to conflict if these policies are perceived as dislocating to the sending or receiving countries.

STILL, VIOLENCE is a sign of institutional failure and system overload. Social institutions and capacity for adjustment can be powerful inhibitors of conflict that is created by changes in demographic characteristics. At the international level such failures have resulted in institutional innovations such as the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund. But often there is a marked gap between institutional capability and demographic transformation, rendering institutions largely ineffective in absorbing or dealing with conflict. Markets can be powerful forces for regulating social interactions and preventing institutional failure, only if all parties implicitly agree to respond to impersonal market forces and accept the results. Market forces, however, are the first casualties of violent conflict.

Competition among nations, commonly manifested in increased armament expenditures, does not arise out of nowhere. It is the result of pressures from both outside and inside a society which result in a spiral of conflict. This spiral, if unchecked, will lead to overt violence. Evidence from a series of studies of armament competition in a variety of contexts points to the strong influence of a country's internal characteristics upon its own arms expenditures.[2] Arms races are not only reactive but also have domestic roots.

Once this competitive process takes shape and antagonists are poised, often reinforced by their alliance structures, it takes an act of provocation to set off a violent conflict. The assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the bombing of Pearl Harbor were not accidents or whimsical acts but the outcome of conflict processes in which all the protagonists played an active role. The distinction between victim and aggressor is inappropriate in situations where all parties are engaged in gaining or maintaining advantage. The critical issue is that the state is an aggregation of individuals: ultimately demographic characteristics and relationships to the environment will shape state behavior and international outcomes. □

1. Nazli Choucri, "Perspectives on Population and Conflict," in Choucri, ed., *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Population and Conflict* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1984), pp. 1–25.
2. Nazli Choucri and Robert C. North, *Nations in Conflict: National Growth and International Violence* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1975), pp. 234–43.