

Dad's Army: age shall weary them

Falling birthrates are about to hit defence forces hard, with ramifications throughout the world, writes Cynthia Banham

When the former US president Herbert Hoover came up with one of the great truisms of warfare in the 20th century, he was working on an assumption no one ever imagined would change. "Older men declare war. But it is the youth that must fight and die."

War, for all its horrors, would always have a near-inexhaustible supply of youth to take up arms – or so Hoover thought. But as we move further into the 21st century, for developed nations at least, this increasingly no longer holds true. A demographer, Bernard Salt, puts it bluntly: "We will be a youth desert by the 2030s and 2040s."

Global demographic changes mean rich countries with low birthrates will experience a fundamental diminishing of the pool of available recruits to staff their militaries. Poorer countries at the other end of the spectrum, meanwhile, are facing population booms.

On a recent visit to Australia, Richard Armitage, the former US deputy secretary of state, singled out these changes in world populations as one of the "certainties" of the international strategic environment.

The unexpected consequence of the population changes – until now thought of mainly in terms of retirement incomes and health systems – is that national defence policy is about to be turned on its head.

Consider these statistics: the average age of an Australian is 36.9; for Britain it's 39.3 and for Japan it's 42.9. By contrast, Pakistan's average age is 19.8, Papua New Guinea's is 21.2, and Nigeria's is 18.7. The critical age range for defence recruitment is 18 to 35.

If one of the world's most scarce resources today is oil, within the next three or four decades – for developed nations, at least – it is going to be youth labour.

"One of the strategic military issues of the 2030s and 2040s may well be access to cheap and plentiful supplies of youth, which will be relatively rare in the developed world," Salt says. "The hot buttons of global politics – oil, technology, capital – that we have seen evolve over the [past] 50 years might actually have a new club member."

The implications of these demographic shifts are immense, yet they are ones defence leaders believe governments are yet to even contemplate.

Defence policy makers are preoccupied with Iraq, terrorism and the rise of China.

Senator Russell Trood, a Liberal backbencher and former associate professor of international relations at Griffith University in Brisbane, believes it is "unfortunate"

more time is not being spent focusing on the implications of population pressures from a strategic perspective.

"As important as terrorism is, there are some other issues perhaps of longer-term significance," he says.

The emerging imbalance in youth populations will force developed countries into a serious rethink on many fronts – from the structure of defence forces and the reliance placed on technology over manpower, to the desirability of new immigration programs and international coalitions, to ultimately, the way force is used.

What will become increasingly important is making sure the younger generation's soldiers, sailors and airmen are in the jobs only young people can do.

Trood believes the looming population declines will flow through to national defence forces by reducing the available pool of recruits for the armed forces and reducing tax revenues, therefore constraining defence spending. This could conceivably affect attitudes towards the use of military force, potentially affecting a state's strategic culture.

"Strategic culture is about the way countries use force to achieve strategic objectives, and if you have a smaller military, there may be a reluctance to sacrifice [it] because it will be harder to replace it," Trood says.

The picture will be completely different for developing countries with large youth populations. Trood sees more potential for instability and ethnic wars if those young people are not integrated into their countries' economies.

Ross Babbage, who heads the security think tank the Kokoda Foundation, says some developing states may be more willing to throw their weight around.

"Countries we've not really considered terribly seriously in terms of their global power are certainly going to have much larger populations than others," he says. "Some of these countries are now going to be posturing themselves on the global stage in a way we haven't seen before, and exactly how this is going to play out no one can be sure."

While numbers of people alone may not mean much, as Babbage points out: "Nevertheless, we are talking about some countries being in quite a different situation when considering their total future development, and that includes their capacity for generating defence capability."

The demographic changes are happening in two ways. The populations of most of the developed world, with the exception of

the US because of its large Hispanic population, are growing older, and the numbers of youth is shrinking.

The birthrates of the richest nations stand at two births or fewer a woman, while the replacement rate is 2.1. Data from the United Nations predicts the populations of countries such as Japan and Italy will fall in the next 25 years, while Australia's population will grow a modest 5 million.

At the same time, many developing countries – apart from China, thanks to its one-child policy – are experiencing a youth bulge. Their population numbers are set to explode.

Birthrates in the poorest nations of Latin America, Africa, the South Pacific and some parts of Asia are between five and seven births a woman. In southern Asia, the population of Pakistan is expected to blow out from 165 million to 246 million by 2030, while, in Africa, Nigeria's population will grow from 131 million to 204 million.

What this means is a very different world. "It is people in their 20s, 30s and 40s that really form households, nurture the young,

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ALLAN BEHM, defence analyst

pay taxes – now that's the muscle, they're the pistons of any community," Salt says. "Who is going to produce the pistons for the next 30, 40 years? It ain't gonna be the developed world of the late 20th century."

It's a problem which is exacerbated for Australia by the demands on its youth from the international labour market, which is increas-

ingly luring its young skilled workers overseas.

In Australia, where the Government is already grappling with military retention and recruitment problems thanks to a strong economy and a tight labour market, there will be a further squeezing of the number of people in the target age group.

A defence analyst, Allan Behm, has considered some of the implications of the global demographic changes for defence forces.

Developed nations such as Australia and Western Europe will have little option but to invest in technology rather than manpower. "We'll still need an army, but we will need an army with extremely high levels of self-protection so we don't have casualties, while at the same time we're able to hold ground because in all war fighting, holding ground is still going to be very important," he says.

It's a big ask.

Babbage says there will have to be a constant review of how personnel are used. Developed states might be less inclined to involve themselves in messy conflicts in foreign territory where international intervention might be needed.

"There's going to be greater limitations on what can be done and, personally, I think it's going to pose enormous dilemmas for the international community," Babbage says.

The US and its allies will increasingly have difficulty "getting their noses dirty" in tough urban environments such as modern war-torn Iraq. "Being up in close, putting troops on the ground, it's going to be expensive, it's going to take a long time to achieve anything substantial in some of these environments, and it's going to be very expensive in human terms and a price most Western democracies are not going to be prepared to face.

"It does change the nature of the game. It means that for those prepared to pay a big price, take a big human cost – and some developing countries might feel they're much better able to do that – then there'll be certain ways they can take on the major powers, especially on their own territory."

Whatever the result, it is clear demographics should be on the minds of the nation's strategic planners.



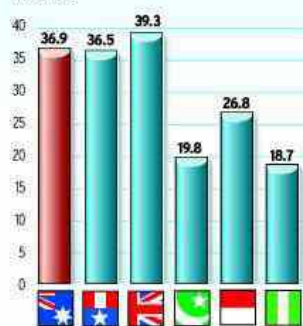
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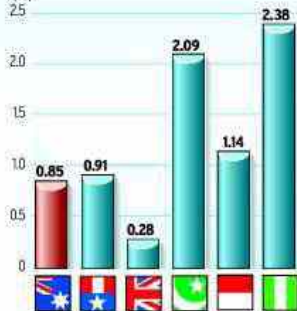
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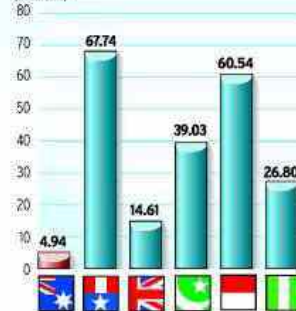
MEDIAN AGE



POPULATION GROWTH (%)



PEOPLE AVAILABLE FOR MILITARY SERVICE (MILLIONS)



PEOPLE REACHING MILITARY SERVICE AGE ANNUALLY (MILLIONS)

