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*Published Version:*

Michela, C., Enrico, F., Sonia, L. (2017). NATO's demographic paradox. GLOBAL CHANGE, PEACE & SECURITY, 29(3), 249-271 [10.1080/14781158.2017.1361392].

*Availability:*

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/614430> since: 2017-12-31

*Published:*

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2017.1361392>

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**Michela Ceccorulli, Enrico Fassi & Sonia Lucarelli (2017) NATO's demographic paradox, *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 29:3, 249-271, DOI: 10.1080/14781158.2017.1361392**

The final published version is available online at  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2017.1361392>

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# NATO's demographic paradox

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## ABSTRACT

Russia, cyberterrorism, Da'esh are among the most quoted challenges to NATO mentioned in the organizations' documents, specialized literature and newspaper articles. How about a subtler, less striking but real challenge like demographic change? Demographic trends are increasingly recognized as relevant in understanding international politics and particularly international security, but only seldom taken into consideration when dealing with NATO's future challenges. NATO, hence, suffers from the limits of a political–military institution designed for a post-Second World War demographic and security context that is changing drastically – and is expected to change even more in the foreseeable future. The aim of this article is to explore the current and projected demographic trends at the global level, evaluate their security implications and then draw inferences for the challenges and opportunities that will arise for NATO out of the sketched scenarios. Based on this analysis, we posit that the Alliance is facing a demographic paradox, whereby it is increasingly unable to cope with external demographic challenges because internal demographic changes are weakening the cohesion needed to provide an effective response.

## KEYWORDS

NATO; demographics; security; transatlantic divide; challenges

## Demographics and security

Demographic change shapes economic and geopolitical power like water shapes rock. Up close the force may appear trivial, but given enough time it can move mountains.<sup>1</sup>

Demographic trends are increasingly recognized as relevant in understanding international politics and particularly international security, across a number of perspectives. From an International Relations (IRs) standpoint, scholars such as Jennifer Dabbs Sciubba highlight that 'far from peripheral, population issues of fertility, mortality, and migration are central to all facets of national security',<sup>2</sup> and others such as Myron Weiner and Sharon Stanton Russell and colleagues have reasoned on the ways in which demographic factors, alone or together with other variables affect the stability and the security of states and societies.<sup>3</sup> Seemingly, while the composition of the population in

<sup>1</sup>Richard Jackson, 'Demographic Trends and Realities', in *Global Forecasts 2011*, eds. Craig Cohen and Josiane Gabel (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Jennifer Dabbs Sciubba, *The Future Faces of War: Population and National Security* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 1.

<sup>3</sup>M. Weiner and Sharon S. Russell, eds., *Demography and National Security* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001).

ethnic terms is considered relevant as far as civil conflicts are concerned,<sup>4</sup> refugee studies have emphasized the role of massive outflows of persons in triggering regional turmoil.<sup>5</sup> Age structures can have relevant consequences too: while a youthful age structure has been claimed to be less conducive to a stable liberal democracy,<sup>6</sup> other studies focus attention on the implications of both population ageing and the decline of military capabilities.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, diseases (HIV, epidemics in general) and other factors increasing mortality rates among the military-age population especially in Africa may negatively impact on peace-keeping operations by decreasing the available peace-keeping forces.<sup>8</sup> In the spotlight are also the security implications of migration,<sup>9</sup> urbanization<sup>10</sup> and the demographic factors associated with homegrown Muslim terrorism in the West.<sup>11</sup> As this brief sketch of the studies on the issue already shows, the implications of demographic trends on security are multiple, visible and largely demonstrated by the specialized literature.

Since NATO is the world's strongest security institution, to paraphrase Jackson (who was referring to the United States), we can claim that its long-term prosperity and security 'may depend in crucial ways on how effectively it prepares for the demographic transformation now sweeping the world'.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, while there is a tendency to think of demography only in ecological terms (e.g. resources and climate balances), political demographers stress the need to think of how institutions are vulnerable to demographic changes in their environment, as affecting the magnitude of tasks and the availability of resources for those tasks.<sup>13</sup> NATO, in this view, suffers from the limits of an institution designed for a post-Second World War demographic and security context that is changing drastically, and will change even more in the foreseeable future.

<sup>4</sup>Monica Duddy Toft, 'Population Shift and Civil War: A Test of Power-transition Theory', *International Interactions* 33, no. 2 (2007): 243–69.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Sarah Kenyon Lisher, 'Security and Displacement in Iraq: Responding to the Forced Migration Crises', *International Security* 33, no. 2 (2008): 95–119 and Alexander Betts and Gil Loescher, *Refugees in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup>Richard Cincotta, 'Half a Chance: Youth Bulges and Transitions to Liberal Democracies', in *New Directions in Demographic Security*, ECSP Report, Issue 13, 2008–09 and Elisabeth Leahy et al., *The Shape of Things to Come: Why Age Structure Matters to a Safer, More Equitable World* (Washington, DC: PAI, 2007).

<sup>7</sup>'Demography and Security' (paper presented at RAND conference proceedings, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, 2000) and Nicholas Eberstadt, 'The Dying Bear. Russia's Demographic Disaster', *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2011-11-01/dying-bear>.

<sup>8</sup>Jennifer Dabbs Sciubba, 'Population in Defense Policy Planning', in *New Directions in Demographic Security*, ECSP report no. 13, 2008–09.

<sup>9</sup>Fiona Adamson, 'Crossing Borders. International Migration and National Security', *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 165–99; Michael Teitelbaum and Jan Winter, *A Question of Numbers. High Fertility, Low Fertility, and the Politics of National Identity* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998); Andrew Geddes, *The Politics of Migration and Immigration in Europe* (New York: Sage Publications Ltd., 2003); and Myron Weiner and Sharon Stanton Russell, eds., *Demography and National Security* (New York: Berghahan Books, 2001).

<sup>10</sup>Jeremy Wallace, 'Cities, Redistribution, and Authoritarian Regime Survival', *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 3 (2013): 632–45; Clionadh Raleigh and Henrik Urdal, 'Climate Change, Demography, Environmental Degradation, and Armed Conflict', in *New Directions in Demographic Security*, ECSP report no. 13, 2008–09.

<sup>11</sup>Risa Brooks, 'Muslim "Homegrown" Terrorism in the United States: How Serious Is the Threat?', *International Security* 36, no. 2 (2011): 7–47; Christian Joppke, 'Europe and Islam: Alarmists, Victimists and Integration by Law', *West European Politics* 37, no. 6 (2014): 1314–35; Massimo Livi Bacci, *Il futuro delle popolazioni islamiche in Europa*, Neodemos, 2015, <http://www.neodemos.info/il-futuro-delle-popolazioni-islamiche-in-europa-2/>; and Pierangelo Isernia and Francesco Olmas-troni, 'Images of the Immigrant, European Public Opinion and Immigration', in *The EU, Migration and the Politics of Administrative Detention*, eds. Michela Ceccorulli and Nicola Labanca (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 59–77.

<sup>12</sup>Jackson, 'Demographic Trends and Realities', 40.

<sup>13</sup>Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

As a defence alliance, these changes require NATO to be aware, to be prepared and perhaps to adapt to new external threats and challenges. Moreover, since NATO is also a political organization, diverging demographic trends among its 28 members might specifically affect its functioning as an institution, exacerbating existing problems such as burden-sharing, political cohesion and the definition of its strategic posture.

Quite surprisingly, however, the demography-security literature has never systematically applied itself to exploring the consequences of current and projected demographic developments for NATO. The few works linking demographic phenomena with NATO so far have focused on very specific issues, such as the transatlantic demographic imbalance,<sup>14</sup> the decline in military manpower,<sup>15</sup> the implications of changing demographics on 'out-of-area' operations<sup>16</sup> or the challenges of state-building in populous, fragile states.<sup>17</sup> Other articles focus attention on the United States alone, and hence only very indirectly on NATO.<sup>18</sup>

Although useful, these contributions miss the whole picture given by the simultaneous combination of different external and internal demographic challenges, and their consequences for the functioning of NATO as politico-military institution. The aim of this article, instead, is to use literature on demographic trends and security to read the current data and projections on and around the Transatlantic Alliance, so as to evaluate the overall challenges to NATO arising from population changes. In doing so, it adopts foresight as a method. In recent years this method has gained increasing usage among scholars for the simple reason that demographic projections generally have much greater reliability than those based on economic, political and technological variables, thus allowing more reliable analyses. Not only has foresight deeply breached the divide between the academic and practitioners' worlds, demography has been at the centre of this exercise and has been employed by international organizations (IOs) (NATO and the EU among others) and states.<sup>19</sup>

The article is divided into two main parts. The first considers demographic phenomena occurring outside the NATO area (population growth, youth bulges, urbanization and migration), while the second part looks at other demographic developments (population decline, ageing and immigration) that are creating specific challenges within the Alliance. For each demographic phenomenon, we provide an overview of current and prospective demographic trends, drawing from the latest available data and projections, then we look at how this has been recently discussed in IR literature as somehow linked to security. By matching demographic projections (up to 2035) with theoretical expectations, we highlight the potential implications for NATO, both in terms of external security challenges and inter-allied dynamics.

<sup>14</sup>Jeffrey Simon, 'NATO Uncertain Future. Is Demography Destiny?', *Joint Forces Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2009): 51–9; Jeffrey Simon, 'The Future of the Alliance: Is Demography Destiny?', in *NATO in Search of a Vision*, eds. G. Aybet and R. Moore (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010).

<sup>15</sup>Susan Clark, *Demographic and the Military Balance: NATO in the Nineties* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 1987).

<sup>16</sup>Philip Cuccia, *Implications of a Changing NATO* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2010).

<sup>17</sup>Jack A. Goldstone, Monty G. Marshall, and Hilton Root, 'Demographic Growth in Dangerous Places: Concentrating Conflict Risks', *International Area Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2014): 120–33.

<sup>18</sup>Mark L. Haas, 'A Geriatric Peace? The Future of US Power in a World of Ageing Populations', *International Security* 32, no. 1 (2007): 112–47 and Michael Beckley, 'China's Century? Why America's Edge will Endure', *International Security* 36, no. 3 (2011/2012): 41–78.

<sup>19</sup>For examples, see <http://www.foresight-platform.eu/>.

Based on this analysis, we posit that the Alliance is facing a demographic paradox, whereby it might become increasingly unable to cope with the external demographic challenges because internal demographic changes are weakening the cohesion needed to provide an effective response.

### **The MYMU (Many, Young, Moving and Urbanized) factor: external demographic challenges for NATO**

While some scholars have observed with concern that the demographic trends of Europe and the United States will create internal challenges to the cohesiveness and effectiveness of NATO,<sup>20</sup> no comprehensive analysis has been undertaken on the external challenges that some demographic trends will inevitably pose to the Alliance. We explore the main challenges arising, in turn, from trends in population growth, youth bulges, migration and urbanization outside NATO's borders. For each demographic phenomenon, we start with an overview of current and prospective trends followed by a discussion of its relevance in security terms (as identified by the specialized literature), and finally we highlight the potential implications for NATO. All demographic estimates and projections featured in this essay are drawn from the 2015 revision of the United Nations Population Division's demographic data set.<sup>21</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, projected population data (after 2015) are drawn from the revised 2015 medium fertility variant projection.

### **'Many (and poor)': population and poverty**

Looking at the potential impact of demographic trends on political and security dynamics, the first aspect to take into consideration is the prospects of population growth (or decline) at the global level and its spatial distribution among countries and regions.

Starting with the global picture, the news is that the world population is still growing: from 7.35 billion in 2015, it is projected to increase to 8.8 billion in 2035, which means that in 20 years' time the world will be inhabited by almost 1.5 billion more people. Although the rate of world population growth is decreasing in contrast to previous predictions,<sup>22</sup> the world is still far from reaching the 'peak': by 2050 the global population is expected to increase by another billion, reaching 9.7 billion people (10.8 and 8.7 billion in the high and low projection, respectively).

Faced with these numbers, the first observation is that this growth is likely to put a strain on the world resources to a variable degree depending on the ability of both political and technological developments to cope with the phenomenon. Indeed, literature has emphasized different security mechanisms associated with population growth, mostly related to the potential depletion of available natural resources and the ensuing increase in civil strife, favoured by weak or parochial state institutions.<sup>23</sup> However, contrary to a 'Malthusian debate', Jack Goldstone argues that it is 'population distortions' – populations

<sup>20</sup>Simon, 'NATO Uncertain Future' and Jackson, 'Demographic Trends and Realities', 42.

<sup>21</sup>United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 'World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision, Key Findings and Advance Tables' (working paper no. ESA/P/WP.241, 2015).

<sup>22</sup>See Patrick Gerland et al., 'World Population Stabilization Unlikely This Century', *Science* 346 (2014): 234–7.

<sup>23</sup>Colin H. Kahl, 'Population Growth, Environmental Degradation and State-sponsored Violence: The Case of Kenya, 1991–93', *International Security* 23, no. 2 (1998): 80–119.

growing too fast, too young or too urbanized – and their geographical distribution that can affect security, more than overall numbers.<sup>24</sup>

Accordingly, a second key aspect of the global picture is that almost all population increase (about 98%) will occur in the less developed areas of the world. In particular, population growth remains especially high in the group of 48 countries designated by the United Nations as the least developed countries (LDCs), of which 27 are in Africa. Although the growth rate of the LDCs is projected to slow from its current 2.4% per annum, the population of this group is forecast to double in size from 954 million inhabitants in 2015 to 1.9 billion in 2050 and to further increase by the end of the century. Among the LDCs, the populations of Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Mali, Niger, Somalia, Uganda, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia are projected to increase between 2.5 and 3.6 times by 2050, and at the current pace of fertility decline, their populations are nearly certain to continue growing beyond 2100. Of the extra 2.4 billion people expected to be added to the global population between 2015 and 2050, more than half (1.3 billion) will be in Africa. Asia is projected to be the second largest contributor to future global population growth, its headcount increasing by 0.9 billion between 2015 and 2050.<sup>25</sup> China and India, specifically, will see an overall further increase in population of about 300 million people in the next two decades, with India surpassing China in around 2022 to then become the most populous country in the world for the rest of the century.

These numbers might have security implications in at least two ways. The African countries previously mentioned are countries in which poverty is endemic, and the combination of high demographic growth and poverty has frequently proved to lead to social instability and tensions,<sup>26</sup> as well as increased migration.<sup>27</sup> Asian population growth, especially in China and India, is relevant as far as it contributes to that power shift in the international system that has been widely documented and explored, and also in security terms (Figure 1).<sup>28</sup>

The third important piece of data is that more than 40 countries will experience an overall decline in population. Most of these are located in Europe, and especially southern and eastern Europe. While Asia, Oceania, Latin America and the Caribbean will continue to grow in the coming decades (+20%, +44%, +24%, respectively in 2050), and Africa will literally explode, Europe<sup>29</sup> is the only world region that in the same time span will experience an absolute decline in population (−4.3%), due to its low fertility rate.

<sup>24</sup>Jack A. Goldstone, 'Flash Points and Tipping Points: Security Implications of Global Population Change' in ECSP report no. 13, 2008–2009.

<sup>25</sup>UNDESA, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 'World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision, Key Findings and Advance Tables' (working paper no. ESA/P/WP.241, 2015), 5–7.

<sup>26</sup>Goldstone, 'Flash Points and Tipping Points', 6.

<sup>27</sup>Philippe Fargues and Sara Bonfanti, 'When the Best Option Is a Leaky Boat', Policy Brief (Fiesole: Migration Policy Centre, EUI, 2014/2015).

<sup>28</sup>Amitav Acharya, 'Power Shift or Paradigm Shift? China's Rise and Asia's Emerging Security Order', *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2014): 158–73; Michael Cox, 'Power Shifts, Economic Change and the Decline of the West?', *International Relations* 26, no. 4 (2012): 369–88; Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009); Danny Quah, 'The Global Economy's Shifting Centre of Gravity', *Global Policy* 2 (2011): 3–9; Seong-ho Sheen, 'Northeast Asia's Aging Population and Regional Security: "Demographic Peace?"', *Asian Survey* 53, no. 2 (2013); and Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: Norton, 2008).

<sup>29</sup>The UN definition of Europe is a geographical one, which includes Russia, Ukraine and Moldova, as well as the Balkans, and excludes Turkey. However, the statement remains true even when we exclude these countries and look at the EU28.



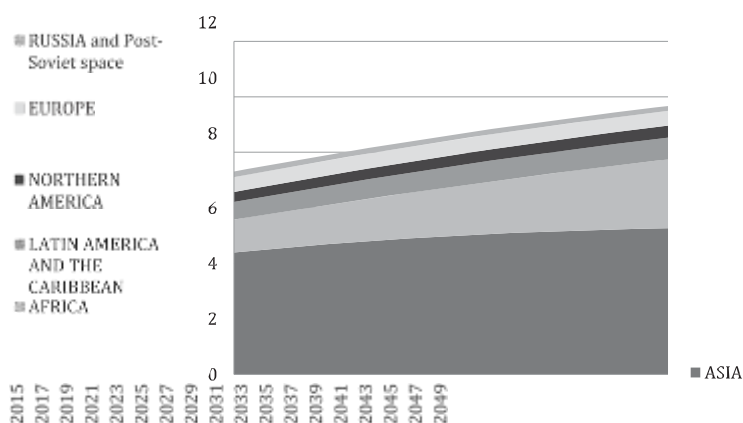


Figure 1. Global and regional population growth, 2015–50 (in billions). Source: UN, Population Division (2015).

Population decline has been discussed as an adverse development for a country's (or region's) economic growth,<sup>30</sup> military might<sup>31</sup> and international status.<sup>32</sup> Along this perspective, predictions about the demographic 'End of Europe'<sup>33</sup> and more generally the 'Death of the West' have flourished.<sup>34</sup> Challenging mainstream arguments, some authors posit that the demographic outlook of the Western world is not so dire as the projections would imply, particularly, thanks to possible, and in the authors' views, likely 'demographic' policies (pro-immigration, pro-fertility measures) and 'non-demographic' mechanisms (labour market incentives), both sustained by a mature level of democracy.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, literature suggests that the same demographic trends might impact differently in democratic and non-democratic regimes,<sup>36</sup> conferring a comparative advantage on the former. However, the current attitude of many European states before the migration flows in the years 2014–16 (at least until the moment of writing) does not herald more 'open' policies.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, the thesis of 'Death of the West' at best looks incomplete, but the thesis supporting a cohesive group like 'the West' is simplistic in demographic terms too. In contrast with Europe, the United States will experience sustained population growth (almost +21% in 2050), due to higher fertility rate and intense immigration flows: a veritable 'transatlantic

<sup>30</sup>Europe Needs Many More Babies to Avert a Population Disaster', *The Guardian*, August 23, 2015 and 'Age Invaders', *The Economist*, April 26, 2014.

<sup>31</sup>Anthony Cordesman, *The Causes of Stability and Unrest in the Middle East and North Africa: An Analytic Survey* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012). See also James H. Schulz and Robert H. Binstock, *The Economics and Politics of Growing Older in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

<sup>32</sup>'The Incredible Shrinking Country', *The Economist*, March 25, 2014.

<sup>33</sup>Aaron Andreason, 'Will the EU Survive Its Demographic Deficit?', *Yale Economic Review* 7, no. 1 (2011): 19–23; Walter Laqueur, *The Last Days of Europe: Epitaph for an Old Continent* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2007); and Haas, 'A Geriatric Peace?'

<sup>34</sup>Fareed Zakaria, *Post-American World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008) and Patrick Joseph Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2002).

<sup>35</sup>David Coleman and Stuart Basten, 'The Death of the West: An Alternative View', *Population Studies* 69, no. 1 (2015): 107–18.

<sup>36</sup>Eberstadt, 'The Dying Bear'.

<sup>37</sup>According to some estimates, in order to maintain the current ratio of retirees to the general population Europe would need an extra 40 million people by 2020, and about 250 million by 2050. <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-09-03/europe-doesn-t-have-enough-immigrants>.



demographic divide' thus seems to emerge with consequences for NATO that need to be addressed.

### **Implications for NATO: shrinking population may lead to weakening of NATO power**

The first consequence of the abovementioned trends has to do with the relative demographic punch of the NATO area in the world. While in the 1950s the population of the Atlantic Alliance's countries represented 13.7% of world population, in 2015 – despite several rounds of enlargement – the current population of the NATO area constitutes 12.5% of the world total, and in 2050 this quota is set to fall to 10.3%.<sup>38</sup> To provide evidence of the changing demographic context, among the 10 most populous countries in the 1950s, 4 were NATO members (with France in the 12th place) while as projected, in 2050 only the United States (by then surpassed by Nigeria) will be among the 10. Turkey the next NATO member, is ranked 19th. NATO's share of world GDP seems doomed to follow a similar trend: from around 60% in 1950, to 50% in 2000, to 38% today.<sup>39</sup> This loss of relative weight, however, does not necessarily represent a direct threat to the security of the Alliance, but a background condition perhaps affecting other challenges.

A more direct threat would be constituted by a significant decline – both in absolute and relative terms – in NATO's military might, starting from the very basic aspect of number of military personnel. Various authors have signalled that current demographic trends may further impact on the capability to maintain current levels of NATO military personnel in the future.<sup>40</sup> The example of Russia is telling: due to a combination of very low fertility and significant mortality rates, the country has experienced a substantial population decline that is due to affect the size and quality of its army still reliant on conscription.<sup>41</sup> As for NATO member states, given the demographic discrepancy between Europe and the United States, the challenge of recruitment may worsen the long-standing problem of burden-sharing within the Alliance (see next section). The same also applies to armaments and other resources: although NATO's share of the world GDP is set to decline, for some time its members will remain among the richest economies on the planet, controlling a significant share of world military expenditure (even though, should current trends continue, it may not account for the absolute majority – see Table 1); future trends in defence expenditure will thus depend mostly on different preferences in terms of budget allocation. In this view, it is worth noting that – at least in 2016 – the on-going terrorist threat is pushing the defence budgets of NATO's European countries upwards, both for internal and external security reasons, thus reversing a 20-year trend.<sup>42</sup> The main challenge linked to military personnel, though, might not come from the shrinking military-age cohorts in themselves, but from the type of mission NATO will

<sup>38</sup> Authors' own calculations on United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2015). World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision. File POP/1-1: total population (both sexes combined).

<sup>39</sup> Authors' own calculations on World Bank dataset, World Development Indicators accessed on 09/09/2015.

<sup>40</sup> Simon, 'NATO' Uncertain Future', 55 and Tibor S. Tresch, 'Challenges in the Recruitment of Professional Soldiers in Europe' (paper presented at the international conference on 'Armed Forces and Conflict Resolution in a Globalized World', National University and Korea Military Academy, Seoul, July 14–17, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> Eberstadt, 'The Dying Bear'.

<sup>42</sup> Alessandro Marrone, Olivier De France, and Daniele Fattibene, eds, *Defence Budgets and Cooperation in Europe: Developments, Trends and Drivers*, January 2016, <http://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/defence-budgets-and-cooperation-europe-trends-and-investments>. Liz Alderman, 'Terror Threats Thaw Budgets Across Europe', The New York Times, January 31, 2016.

Table 1. Military expenditure (% of world total).

	1991	2001	2014
NATO total	70.7	62.0	52.2
United States	41.5	35.0	34.2
NATO-non-United States	29.2	27.1	18.0
China, P.R.	1.9	4.0	11.3
Japan	4.4	5.3	3.5
India	1.6	2.5	3.0

Source: SIPRI military expenditure database (2015).

need to perform in the future.<sup>43</sup> As it has been noted, the majority of population growth in the next 20–30 years will be concentrated in ‘fragile countries’, which are considered to be more prone to conflict and lack the capacities to manage such expansion.<sup>44</sup> Peace-keeping, peace-building, peace-enforcing and ‘stabilization missions’ in general in highly populated countries require not only the most sophisticated military technology, but also significant manpower on the ground. Quinlivan,<sup>45</sup> for example, finds that successful strategies for population security and control require force ratios of as many or more than 20 security personnel (troops and police combined) per 1000 inhabitants. These population-driven force ratios yield a number of daunting implications both for the size of the force itself and for the prospect of maintaining it over time: in the case of Iraq, for example, with a total population of 25 million, for a sustainable stabilization force on a 24-month rotation cycle, the international community would need to draw on a troop base of 2.5 million men and women. If these numbers are to be calculated for countries of about 200 million people (like Ethiopia, Bangladesh or the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2050) or even more (such as Pakistan, Nigeria), this gives an idea of the challenge ahead. So, while the demand for these human-intense missions will probably increase, the ability of NATO countries to intervene with sufficient force to resolve conflicts in fragile states will be severely challenged.

### ‘Young’: youth bulges

In the areas of the world in which fertility is very high and the population is still young, population growth can lead to the phenomenon of ‘youth bulges’, that is, a disproportionate percentage of youth population over other age cohorts – which have significant consequences in political and security terms.<sup>46</sup> This phenomenon is expected to be particularly visible in Africa, where ‘children’ (under the age of 15) accounted for 41% of the population in 2015 and ‘young persons’ (aged 15–24) for 19%, together resulting in 60% of the population. Latin America and the Caribbean and Asia show similar percentages of youths (17% and 16%, respectively), but lower percentages of children (26% and 24%). Given present numbers and estimates on fertility decline in the next decades, the proportion of children in many of these countries is expected to fall, while the size and the proportion of youths can be expected to grow, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

<sup>43</sup>Ronald R. Krebs and Jack S. Levy, ‘Demographic Change and Sources of International Conflict’, in *Demography and National Security*, eds. Myron Weiner and Sharon Stanton Russell (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 62–106.

<sup>44</sup>Goldstone et al., ‘Demographic Growth in Dangerous Places’.

<sup>45</sup>James T. Quinlivan, ‘Burden of Victory. The Painful Arithmetic of Stability Operations’, *RAND Review* 27, no. 2 (2003).

<sup>46</sup>Henrik Urdal, ‘A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence’, UNPD expert paper no. 1/2012.

A population composition with a large proportion of young people is considered to have potentially significant consequences for a country, but there is no agreement as to which way these consequences would lean. On the one hand, countries with a relatively high ratio of the population of prime working age could take advantage of so-called demographic dividend in economic terms,<sup>47</sup> and might also experience pressure for democratization. Moreover, because democracy relies on majority rule, these emerging democratic governments and political parties may have a significant interest in the composition of the population in their areas and thus their policies might be more responsive to the needs of these younger generations.<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand, particularly because having a large percentage of young people can lead to instability, governments facing a youth bulge may be more likely to engage in repressive behaviour than other states.<sup>49</sup> According to several authors, youth bulges give rise to domestic instability – particularly in the form of low-intensity unrest, protest and rioting<sup>50</sup> – and increase the risk of more organized forms of violence like internal conflicts.<sup>51</sup> It is, however, interesting to acknowledge that recent studies caution against overstating the problem, concluding that the existence of a good education system and substantial levels of democracy can temper the likelihood of youth-driven conflict.<sup>52</sup> Finally, as discussed later on, growth in the percentage of young people in countries performing poorly economically is likely to increase the probability of migration towards more affluent countries.<sup>53</sup>

### **Implications for NATO: engaging the young and increased cooperation with regional organizations**

Youth bulges will not directly manifest in NATO member countries and are also predicted to deflate in the neighbouring Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region. However, demographic pressure in the MENA region remains high and it remains to be seen how it will intersect with the population's real or perceived condition of unemployment or underemployment<sup>54</sup> as well as its consequences on neighbouring regions, including Europe. This also raises a challenge for current and prospective Western military intervention: in the case of Afghanistan where a large percentage of the population is young, successful military intervention means nothing if it is not backed by programmes focused on 'engaging' the youth.<sup>55</sup> The same certainly also applies to Iraq and Libya, and would apply to any other country in the region.

In addition, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa are due to experience significant youth bulges. Of the 17 peaks expected in the next years, 12 will happen in this

<sup>47</sup>Robert Eastwood, 'The Demographic Dividend: Retrospect and Prospect', *Economic Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2012): 26–30.

<sup>48</sup>Monica Duffy Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests, and the Indivisibility of Territory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>49</sup>Ragnhild Nordås and Christian Davenport, 'Fight the Youth: Youth Bulges and State Repression', *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 4 (2013): 926–40.

<sup>50</sup>Jack Goldstone et al., eds, *Political Demography: How Population Changes Are Reshaping International Security and National Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>51</sup>Henrik Urdal, 'A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence', *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2006): 607–29.

<sup>52</sup>Urdal, 'A Clash of Generations?' (2012).

<sup>53</sup>Goldstone, 'Flash Points and Tipping Points', 6.

<sup>54</sup>Anthony Cordesman, *The Causes of Stability and Unrest in the Middle East and North Africa: An Analytic Survey* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012).

<sup>55</sup>Sciubba, 'Population in Defense Policy Planning'.

region.<sup>56</sup> Given the projected social, political and economic context in which these developments will occur (in Niger, for example, where just 24% of youth were literate in 2014, the youth population is projected to grow by 92% within the next 15 years<sup>57</sup>), instability and major security challenges at the local or regional level may be prominent.<sup>58</sup>

Mere geographical distance is becoming decreasingly relevant in the evolution of migration routes. Demographic phenomena in remote places are already producing effects on NATO's borders. For example, 2015 was characterized by a huge inflow of refugees and asylum seekers to Turkey and the European Union through the eastern Mediterranean route via Greece and the Balkans: of the 1.8 billion registered crossing the EU frontiers, the majority were Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans escaping conflicts.<sup>59</sup> 2016 instead, saw the revival of a well-established path of migration from sub-Saharan Africa to Italy, through the central Mediterranean route with Nigeria, Gambia and Senegal as the main countries of origin. As the reasons for departures are not limited to conflicts, migration through these paths are expected to continue or increase in the future.

The management and prevention of the potentially negative consequences of youth bulges in sub-Saharan Africa primarily involves actors, which are better equipped and placed to respond: African states, international and regional organizations, and NGOs. For this reason, the implications for the Alliance are more indirect and NATO's strategy for the region needs to be carefully crafted in order to prevent unnecessary militarization of non-military issues. However, NATO has both the interests and the means to intervene, for example, in the event of instability spreading at the regional level or turmoil in a key strategic partner country. In this regard, sub-Saharan Africa will provide opportunities to test NATO's willingness and capacity to cooperate and coordinate with other international and regional organizations in a wider spectrum of tasks: crisis management, conflict prevention, peace-building and reconciliation.<sup>60</sup> This will give NATO the opportunity to change its image as a distant and self-interested actor.

### **‘Moving’ – movements of people**

Migration is a long-standing and widespread demographic phenomenon, concerning almost every country in the globe. Overall, between 1950 and 2015, the major areas of Europe, North America and Oceania have been net receivers of international migrants, while Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean have been net senders, with the volume of net migration generally increasing over time. From 2000 to 2015, average annual net migration to Europe, North America and Oceania amounted to 2.8 million persons per year.

<sup>56</sup>Cummins Matthew and Ortoz Isabel, *When the Global Crisis and Youth Bulge Collide: Double the Jobs Trouble for Youth* (New York: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), February 2012).

<sup>57</sup>Angola, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Nigeria, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia, among others, are also anticipating rapid growth of the population aged 15–24 in a context of low youth literacy rates. UNDESA, 'Youth Population Trends and Sustainable Development', *Population Facts*, no. 1/2015, May 2015.

<sup>58</sup>Terfa W. Abraham and Oluwasola E. Omoju, 'Youth Bulge and Demographic Dividend in Nigeria', *African Population Studies* 27, no. 2 (2014): 352–60.

<sup>59</sup>The number of people 'crossing the border' might be higher than the actual number of migrants, due to the fact that the agency itself is unable to identify multiple entrances. FRONTEX, *FRAN Quarterly*, Quarter 1, January–March 2016, [www.frontex.europa.eu](http://www.frontex.europa.eu).

<sup>60</sup>Nicole Goldin, 'Banking on Africa's Youth', in *Africa in the Wider World*, ed. Richard Downie (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2014).

In the future, net immigration is projected to be a major contributor to population growth in many high-income countries. Between 2015 and 2050, it is forecast that net immigration will account for 82% of population growth in these countries.

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 1 million refugees and migrants fled to Europe by sea in 2015, 84% of which were from the world's top 10 refugee-producing countries, mostly through Turkey to Greece, making the Aegean sea the epicentre of the European 'migration crisis'.<sup>61</sup> These figures, however, do not include Turkey, which alone received 2.9 million Syrians up to March 2016.<sup>62</sup> As the case of Turkey shows, Syria's neighbouring countries have been receiving far more refugees than Europe (245,000 in Iraq, 640,000 in Jordan, over 1 million in Lebanon – a country of 4 million nationals).

Indeed, although the movement of people from Asia, Africa and Latin America to Europe and North America (South–North) has dominated the world migration patterns for almost half a century, flows between developing countries (South–South) have now outpaced the South–North path and are expected to be increasingly relevant. What is more, refugees fleeing war, persecution or other hardships remain to a large extent in the poorest part of the world,<sup>63</sup> something that by itself may further worsen their situation. Despite the fact that emigration could contribute positively to rising security and stability in the countries of origin (by downscaling much of the 'pressure' exercised by overpopulation and unemployment<sup>64</sup>), recipient countries in the South are usually put under severe strain by massive flows of immigration and are likely to experience destabilization and social tensions themselves.

### **Implications for NATO: hands on approach with caution**

Migration has many facets and could lead to multiple consequences: the direction of migration flows as well as the size and nature determine which aspects are more relevant for NATO in terms of external challenges.

South–South migration could create population imbalances in receiving countries, altering the population composition and thus creating new interethnic rivalries or fuelling existing ones. Independent of ethnic composition, mass migration to developing countries – particularly when concentrated in limited geographical areas – could also increase the likelihood of conflict arising from scarce resources such as food, land and water.

When the combination of population growth, conflicts, vulnerability to climate change and food insecurity is considered, sub-Saharan Africa and the greater Middle East are the areas where migration is more likely to turn into a security issue, destabilizing an already fragile region. The spread of instability and conflicts in both sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East could affect NATO both directly, through inflows of migrants and refugees, and indirectly, creating areas of non-governance where criminal activities and even international terrorism could proliferate.

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<sup>61</sup>UNHCR, 'Over One Million Sea Arrivals Reach Europe in 2015', December 30, 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/5683d0b56.html>.

<sup>62</sup>European Commission, 'Turkey: Refugee Crisis', ECHO Factsheet, March 2016, [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/turkey\\_syrian\\_crisis\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/turkey_syrian_crisis_en.pdf).

<sup>63</sup>UNHCR, 'UNHCR Report Shows World's Poorest Countries Host Most Refugees', January 7, 2015.

<sup>64</sup>Stephan De Spiegeleire, 'Effects of Immigration on Domestic Stability in Sending Countries: Three Case Studies', in Demography and Security, eds. Laurient Murawiec and David Adamson (Santa Monica: RAND, 2000), 19.



Until recently, NATO had no direct role in the management of migration. However, the security challenges resulting in migration are potentially so relevant that NATO would have to develop at least the tools to anticipate the most destabilizing flows and cope with their consequences. On the one hand, this means investing adequate resources in monitoring migration hotbeds in foresight of future migration trends. This can be done with other IOs including the UNHCR, for example. On the other hand, it means reinforcing the institutional and political structures of those fragile, non-democratic states that will host the vast majority of the world's population in the next decades.<sup>65</sup> As regime matters, not only to prevent the causes of migration (for example conflicts, or famines),<sup>66</sup> but also for the management of migration in receiving countries, NATO's role in supporting democracy and good governance in receiving countries may be questioned. The best NATO can do to avoid migration becoming a security issue is to ensure that its post-conflict and cooperation policies (i.e. partnerships) include specific attention to migration-related challenges and are coherent with the efforts of other IOs focused on basic human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and better suited to strengthening fragile countries. An example is the EU Trust Fund for Africa launched in November 2015 to respond to 'the challenges of irregular migration and displacement'.<sup>67</sup>

### **'Urbanized': a rising urban population**

Globally, more than half of the world population lives in urban areas although this population is not evenly distributed across regions. While by 2020, half of the population in Asia will be living in urban areas, Africa will only reach this same level by 2035. North America, Australia and New Zealand's urban population was over 80% in 2011, Latin America and the Caribbean was 79% (remarkably high for the less developed regions) and Europe stopped at 73%. The population increase that will be experienced up to 2035, and beyond, will mostly be absorbed by urban spaces, and approximately 6.3 billion people are projected to be living in urban areas by 2050 (67% of the global population).

Urbanization is another trend, which has attracted considerable academic interest. In a seminal study, Robert Bates<sup>68</sup> argued that in developing countries, governments are very sensitive to the demands of their urban population, particularly those living in the capital cities because they are able to, more easily, overcome problems in implementing collective action and opposing and toppling. Jeremy Wallace<sup>69</sup> makes a similar argument and shows that authoritarian regimes are less stable where urban populations are larger. Due to the general trend of rapid urbanization in the developing world, and especially in Africa and Asia, we could expect an increase in the capacity of these populations to make their voices heard. However, especially in the short-run, fast urbanization in poor countries may also be another cause of internal instability, a catalyst for civil conflicts or even a possible avenue for militias or terrorist recruitment. Indeed, densely populated

<sup>65</sup>Goldstone et al., 'Demographic Growth in Dangerous Places'.

<sup>66</sup>See Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Sheen, 'Northeast Asia's Aging Population and Regional Security'.

<sup>67</sup>For an overview of the Trust Fund for Africa, see: [https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/regions/africa/eu-emergency-trust-fund-africa\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/regions/africa/eu-emergency-trust-fund-africa_en).

<sup>68</sup>Robert H. Bates, *Markets and States in Tropical Africa: The Political Basis of Agricultural Policies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

<sup>69</sup>Wallace, 'Cities, Redistribution, and Authoritarian Regime Survival'.

areas better enable the organization and financing of conflicts and at the same time may prove to be potential targets, which essentially elevate them to ‘attractive’ locations for conflicts.<sup>70</sup> Hence, urbanization as a trend is likely to increase the number and probability of urban conflicts.<sup>71</sup>

Other strands of research in this area have emphasized the interaction between urbanization and the age composition of the population. Historically, the correlation between youth bulges and rapid urbanization, especially in contexts of unemployment and poverty, has been an important contributor to political violence.<sup>72</sup> Youths often constitute a disproportionately large part of rural-to-urban migrants and as such, in the face of large youth cohorts, strong urbanization may be expected to lead to the cramming of young people into urban centres, potentially increasing the risk of political unrest,<sup>73</sup> a risk that increases in the event of lack of sturdy political institutions, economic shocks and civil conflicts.<sup>74</sup>

According to literature and available demographic projections, it can be expected that the general trend of rapid urbanization in the developing world, and especially in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, portends a potential increase in political instabilities in the short-run, particularly in fragile democracies and poor societies.

### **Implications for NATO: ‘intervention in cities’**

The likelihood of a NATO intervention in an urban context in the developing world – and particularly in complex, unique environments such as the big slums and megacities mostly located in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa – will probably increase in the near to medium term.<sup>75</sup>

Indeed, this is a possibility that the Alliance appears to have considered: according to Pendleton, ‘Academic and National Defence research share the same conclusion that it is a matter of when, not if, the military will be required to operate in urban environments’.<sup>76</sup> In the Urbanization Experiment that NATO Allied Command Transformation (ACT) is currently conducting, the scenarios considered are those of ‘turmoil in a megacity’, the ‘disruptive impacts of migration’ or ‘large-scale disaster’ in an urban context.<sup>77</sup>

Indeed, the location of mammoth metropolises should also be considered in connection with possible effects of climate change such as extreme weather events or environmental disasters. Although the timing of floods, earthquakes or volcano eruptions cannot be foreseen with any precision, there are ‘risk maps’ which judge the

<sup>70</sup>Clionadh Raleigh and Henrik Urdal, ‘Climate Change, Demography, Environmental Degradation, and Armed Conflict’, in *New Directions in Demographic Security*, ECSP report no. 13, 2008–09.

<sup>71</sup>Brian Nichiporuk, ‘The Security Dynamics of Demographic Factors’, (Santa Monica: RAND, Arroyo Center, 2000) and Eric de la Maissoneuve, ‘War: From Countryside to Urban Settings’, *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup>Jack Goldstone, ‘Population and Security: How Demographic Change Can Lead to Violent Conflict’, *Columbia Journal of International Affairs* 56, no. 1 (2002): 245–63.

<sup>73</sup>Urdal, ‘A Clash of Generations?’

<sup>74</sup>Buhaug Halvard and Henrik Urdal, ‘An Urbanization Bomb? Population Growth and Social Disorder in Cities’, *Global Environmental Change* 23, no. 1 (2013): 1–10.

<sup>75</sup>NATO Strategic Foresight Analysis significantly underlines that the increase in the world urban population by 2030 will be particularly relevant to China and India (together accounting for 37% of the increase) while nine more countries will contribute 26%: Nigeria and the DRC in Africa, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and the Philippines in Asia, Brazil and Mexico in Latin America, and the United States of America, NATO, *Strategic Foresight Analysis Interim Update 2015-Coordinated Draft for Comments and Considerations* (Brussels: NATO ACT, 2015), 20.

<sup>76</sup>Wg Cdr Gordon Pendleton, NATO, ‘Joint Urban Operations and the NATO Urbanisation Project’, *The Three Swords Magazine*, no. 29, 2015, 53–4.

<sup>77</sup><http://www.act.nato.int/urbanisation>.



probability of these events occurring in certain environments, the Asia Pacific featuring prominently.<sup>78</sup> By crossing these data with major urbanization patterns, it is thus possible to anticipate the magnitude of a disaster in highly inhabited environments and its potential human, political and security consequences, including potential outflows of persons. Although it is certainly beyond NATO's mission to combat climate change, the Alliance should strengthen its forecasting efforts, by matching trends in different dimensions in order to identify future potential hotspots. At the same time, NATO might consider enhancing its ability to develop appropriate contingency plans for a wider spectrum of climate-induced crises, specifically in urban contexts: a task for which there will probably be increasing demand in the near future.

### **People, age groups and flows: internal demographic challenges**

The challenges stemming from current and projected demographic trends are not limited to what is happening outside the borders of the Alliance. In an important but perhaps overlooked 2009 article, Jeffrey Simon identified the challenges arising from the demographic change inside NATO. In his words, 'current and prospective demographic shifts within its membership [...] will almost certainly hamper its collective ability to deploy operational forces and further strain the transatlantic relationship in the years ahead'.<sup>79</sup> A few years on, many elements that were detected as sources of a 'transatlantic demographic divide' are still there, and some trends may have since worsened. Moreover, recent data have shed new light on previous analyses and raised important questions for the future of the Alliance.

### **Divided by numbers ...**

The first aspect in which NATO members diverge is population growth. The US population of about 321 million people in 2015 is expected to grow to almost 389 million in 2050, an increase of about 70 million people (+20% of the current population). Following the global trend, during the same period the US population will also get older, but only to a limited extent: the median age is expected to move up slowly (from 38.0 today to 41.7 in 2050). Hence, for the next 20–30 years the United States 'should have an adequate cohort available for military service at current troop levels' (Table 2).<sup>80</sup>

As for Europe, the demographic picture looks more complex. The vast majority of the European NATO members (17 out of 26) are expected to experience population decline in the coming decades. Nonetheless – and contrary to previous expectations,<sup>81</sup> – the total demographic balance for the European pillar of NATO will still be slightly positive in the long term (+9 million people in 2050), even though substantial discrepancies exist. All of the 'new members' are expected to encounter a demographic decline (–16.5 million in total), with some countries such as Bulgaria (–28%), Romania (–22%) and Latvia (–19%) showing a particularly negative outlook. Yet, it is the 'old members' of the southern

<sup>78</sup>IPCC, Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Fifth Assessment Report (2014) (Geneva: IPCC, 2014), <http://ar5-syr.ipcc.ch/>.

<sup>79</sup>Simon, 'NATO' Uncertain Future', 51.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid. Although the article was published in 2009, Simon's analysis was based on UN data released in 2001. The 2015 revision of the UN Population Prospects shows some important differences.

Table 2. Total population in NATO member countries: 2015, 2050 (old and new members).

Total population, both sexes combined, as of 1 July 2015 (thousands)				
NATO	2015	2050	% change 2050–15	Net change 2050–15
New members				
Bulgaria	7150	5154	–27.92	–1996
Romania	19,511	15,207	–22.06	–4305
Latvia	1971	1593	–19.13	–377
Lithuania	2878	2375	–17.47	–503
Croatia	4240	3554	–16.18	–686
Hungary	9855	8318	–15.59	–1537
Poland	38,612	33,136	–14.18	–5475
Estonia	1313	1129	–13.98	–184
Slovakia	5426	4892	–9.85	–534
Albania	2897	2710	–6.44	–186
Slovenia	2068	1942	–6.07	–126
Czech Republic	10,543	9965	–5.49	–578
Sub-total	106,463	89,976	–15.49	–16,487
Old members				
Greece	10,955	9705	–11.40	–1249
Portugal	10,350	9216	–10.96	–1134
Germany	80,689	74,513	–7.65	–6176
Italy	59,798	56,513	–5.49	–3285
Spain	46,122	44,840	–2.78	–1282
Netherlands	16,925	17,602	4.00	677
France	64,395	71,137	10.47	6741
Belgium	11,299	12,527	10.86	1228
Denmark	5669	6299	11.11	630
United Kingdom	64,716	75,361	16.45	10,645
Iceland	329	389	18.00	59
Turkey	78,666	95,819	21.81	17,154
Norway	5211	6658	27.77	1447
Luxembourg	567	803	41.68	236
Sub-total	455,690	481,381	5.64	25,691
Non-European members				
Canada	35,940	44,136	22.80	8196
United States	321,774	388,865	20.85	67,091
NATO total	919,867	1,004,358	9.19	84,491

Source: UN, Population Division (2015).

flank of Europe that appear especially of concern, with Greece (–11.4%), Portugal (–11%), Italy (–5.5%) and Spain (–2.8%), all showing a population decline. Germany too is expected to experience a substantial contraction by 2050 (–7.7%), which, given its demographic size, would translate into loss of over 6 million people as well as demographic leadership in the EU, with potentially significant consequences for its economic primacy and the overall balance of power in Europe.<sup>82</sup>

Conversely, the population of nine countries is expected to grow, with France, the United Kingdom and Turkey featuring prominently: without their demographic contribution, the performance of the European members of the Alliance would be a great deal worse, with a total loss of about 25 million people by 2050. More than a clear-cut division between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ NATO members as depicted by Simon,<sup>83</sup> the incoming demographic divide seems to cut across these categories, separating the growing

<sup>82</sup>Michela Ceccorulli, Enrico Fassi, and Sonia Lucarelli, ‘Europe’s “Depopul-Ageing” Bomb?’, *Global Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2015): 81–91.

<sup>83</sup>Simon, ‘NATO’ Uncertain Future’.

countries of north-west Europe (plus Turkey) from the declining nations of southern, central and eastern Europe.

### **Implications for NATO: a widening Atlantic**

Population growth might have significant implications for economic growth and consequently the economic and human resources a country can devote to security and defence, and ultimately in terms of power. However, it is difficult to evaluate the overall effect of gaps in demographic growth among a large group of countries. A population decline can have both direct economic effects (e.g. in the form of a decline in human capital, state revenues and domestic demand) or indirect effects, mediated by trends in productivity and affected by developments in technology, environment or, ultimately, politics. For NATO, it is the overall combination of the different trends of the 28 member states that will have an impact on the human and financial contribution within the Alliance. The total number of citizens in a country does not formally affect NATO's decision-making system, but the relative weight of a country and its decisions on how to allocate its internal resources do. So, if current demographic projections are respected, the scenario of a widening power gap between the United States and Europe, as well as between 'growing' and 'declining' European members, should be taken into due consideration particularly if reinforced by other demographic trends.

### **... and age**

A second aspect of the transatlantic demographic divide is related to the specific composition of the population, more precisely to the fact that the ages of cohorts of military service men and women are moving in different directions, and, in parallel as Europe is ageing more rapidly and on a wider scale than the United States.

The median age in NATO's European members will indeed increase significantly; up to 47.2 in 2050 from 41.1 in 2015 (+6.1 years) while in the United States it will grow much less (+3.7 years). As a consequence, the difference between the United States and European median age will widen even more, from 3.1 years in 2017 to 5.5 years in 2050. Disaggregated data also show important differences among European countries, with some experiencing a dramatic increase in the median age (e.g. Albania +13.3; Poland +12.2; Turkey +12.1 years) and others showing a trend similar to (the Netherlands, UK, Norway, Luxembourg) or even slower than that of the United States (Lithuania +1.2 years; Latvia, France and Denmark between 2.4 and 2.6 years). Once again, while the transatlantic divide is visible – all of the European partners, including Turkey, will display a higher median age than the United States in 2050. Intra-European differences may result in even more significant differences.

Also of particular interest are the details about the proportion of old people (over 65<sup>84</sup>) out of the total population as shown in Table 3. In 2050, on the European side of the Alliance, the over-65 age group will amount to more than 28% of the total population on average, with 19 countries out of 26 projected to have more than one quarter of their population in this older range. At the same time, in the United States, there will be a

<sup>84</sup>We chose 65 as the threshold because this is becoming the median age of retirement in Europe and thus gives a better idea of the population that is both 'old' and outside the job market.

Table 3. Share of population aged over 65 in NATO countries (2015, 2050).

NATO	% Population over 65		Change (%)
	2015	2050	
Spain	18.8	35.8	90.5
Portugal	20.8	35.2	69.4
Italy	22.4	35.1	56.5
Greece	21.4	34.8	62.8
Slovenia	18.0	32.5	80.7
Germany	21.2	32.3	52.2
Poland	15.5	31.4	102.0
Czech Republic	18.1	30.2	67.0
Croatia	18.9	29.9	57.7
Romania	17.3	29.2	68.9
Bulgaria	20.0	28.6	42.8
Slovakia	13.8	28.6	106.5
Hungary	17.8	27.6	54.7
Estonia	18.8	27.5	46.6
Netherlands	18.2	27.5	50.7
Belgium	18.2	26.7	46.5
France	19.1	26.3	37.7
Latvia	19.4	25.3	30.4
Iceland	13.7	25.1	83.1
United Kingdom	17.8	24.7	39.3
Denmark	19.0	24.3	28.4
Albania	12.4	23.7	91.0
Norway	16.3	23.7	44.9
Luxembourg	14.0	23.4	67.3
Lithuania	18.8	23.1	22.7
Turkey	7.5	20.6	172.9
European mean	17.6	28.2	60.3
Non-European			
Canada	16.1	26.4	63.4
United States of America	14.8	22.2	50.4
NATO mean	17.4	27.9	63.7

Source: UN, Population Division (2015).

shift from the over-65 constituting 14.8% of the population to 22.2% in 2050, further widening the divergences between the two shores of the Atlantic. What is more important are the socio-economic implications of this data: in 2050, the United States will show a somewhat comparable figure to that of Italy, Greece or Germany today; these same countries (together with Spain and Portugal), with 32–35% of their population of ‘retirement age’, will experience a significantly new situation in 2050. Moreover, the transformation that will affect some European countries is particularly impressive: in Spain, Poland, Slovakia and Albania, the percentage of older people will almost double, while in Turkey this will increase almost threefold, shifting from 7.5% to over 20% of the total population in 2050.

### Implications for NATO: diminished capacity

What will be the consequences of these different ageing trends? They will probably affect the transatlantic Alliance at least at three different levels: military capabilities, strategic postures and political preferences. First, due to the contraction of the military-age cohort, Europeans will experience more difficulties than Americans in the recruitment of military personnel, thus resulting in smaller forces and/or lower intake standards.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>85</sup>Simon, ‘NATO’ Uncertain Future’, 55 and Tresch, ‘Challenges in the Recruitment of Professional Soldiers in Europe’.

Second, and consequently, as the human capital will become scarce and casualties perhaps less acceptable, Europeans will be comparatively less eager to fight and intervene abroad in contexts where their soldiers' lives are at risk. Moreover, as some studies suggest,<sup>86</sup> older people seem to be less supportive of military action compared to younger people. Third, Europeans might be less willing to spend on defence, given the growing burden of social welfare on state budgets due to an ageing population. Although the literature cautions against the universal applicability of the 'Guns Versus Butter Trade-off',<sup>87</sup> due to the fact that defence programmes can be financed through different means (taxes, debt financing or the printing of new money), the projected size of the elderly population in Europe is such that it is difficult to imagine that it will not have budget implications. Until 2015, the data showed that in terms of GDP shares, the steady growth in governments' old age-related social expenditure in Europe<sup>88</sup> was matched by a parallel decline in military spending.<sup>89</sup>

Taken together, these three aspects will certainly contribute to complicating the problem of fair burden-sharing within NATO, a fundamental issue that has already created tensions within the Alliance in the past<sup>90</sup> and is a particularly sensitive issue today, given Donald Trump's harsh rhetoric against some European allies.<sup>91</sup> However, more structural trends are at play here. Overall, with a declining population and a strained economy, Europe could develop an even more inward-looking attitude. According to some authors, contrary to the glorious past of the seventeenth–twentieth centuries, when the entire world was getting more 'European', in this century, sluggish demographic trends are indeed leading to a 'de-Europeanisation' of the world.<sup>92</sup> At the same time, although to a lesser extent, according to some scholars, ageing will also affect the United States thus leading to a diminished capability to maintain the current US position in the world, something that could possibly drive towards 'off-shore balancing or isolationist positions',<sup>93</sup> or push the United States to rely less on traditional alliances and more on new, faster-growing and younger strategic partners.<sup>94</sup>

## **Yet they are coming: immigration**

As said, human migration has always existed and has traditionally been considered a means of addressing economic and population imbalances. However, as discussed, certain aspects can transform migration into a (real or perceived) political and security

<sup>86</sup>Howard Schuman and Cheryl Rieger, 'Historical Analogies, Generational Effects, and Attitudes Toward War', *American Sociological Review* 57, no. 3 (1992): 325.

<sup>87</sup>Bruce Russett, 'Defense Expenditures and National Well-being', *The American Political Science Review* 76, no. 4 (1982): 767–77; Alex Mintz, 'Guns Versus Butter: A Disaggregated Analysis', *The American Political Science Review* 83, no. 4 (1989): 1285–93; and Uk Heo and John Bohte, 'Who Pays for National Defense? Financing Defense Programs in the United States, 1947–2007', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 3 (2012): 413–38.

<sup>88</sup>OECD dataset, [http://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?DatasetCode=SOCX\\_AGG](http://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?DatasetCode=SOCX_AGG).

<sup>89</sup>SIPRI Milix dataset, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milix>.

<sup>90</sup>Ida Oma, 'Explaining States' Burden-sharing Behaviour Within NATO', *Cooperation and Conflict* 47, no. 4 (2012): 562–73.

<sup>91</sup>M. Birnbaum, 'European Leaders Shocked as Trump Slams NATO and E.U., Raising Fears of Transatlantic Split', *Washington Post*, January 16, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe-leaders-shocked-as-trump-slams-nato-eu-raising-fears-of-transatlantic-split/2017/01/16/82047072-dbe6-11e6-b2cf>.

<sup>92</sup>Jean-Claude Chesnais, 'The Decolonization of Europe', in *Demography and Security*, eds. Laurent Murawiec and David Adamson (Santa Monica: RAND, 2000), 14.

<sup>93</sup>Haas, 'A Geriatric Peace?', 114.

<sup>94</sup>Jackson, 'Demographic Trends and Realities', 42.

challenge. Challenges of migration coming from outside NATO territory has been discussed but equally important are challenges of within NATO migration. At least three can be considered in detail here, given their consequences for the Alliance.

First, the 2015 ‘migration crisis’ has exacerbated both social and political tensions in receiving countries in Europe. Huge, sudden or unexpected migration flows can indeed produce domestic turmoil and ‘public order’ problems,<sup>95</sup> especially when the bulk of inflows are concentrated in small areas, putting reception capabilities under strain (e.g. Lampedusa in Italy) or when the state is perceived as incapable of managing asylum requests and general controls at its own frontier (e.g. in Greece).<sup>96</sup> More worryingly, internal domestic politics in some European countries are being dramatically affected by the refugee crisis, with fringe groups increasing their supporters and governments undertaking unprecedented positions in their attempts to address the refugee crisis (e.g. in Hungary, but also in relation to Brexit). Moreover, the crisis has fuelled interstate frictions, the reintroduction of controls at borders being only one of many examples.<sup>97</sup> Overall, migration flows have impacted the European space of freedom and security, questioning the validity (and irrevocability) of the Schengen Agreement, and maybe the solidity of the whole European integration project.

The second potential issue of concern is the supposed link between migration and terrorism. Since 9/11, numerous episodes of violence in Europe have been (correctly or otherwise) associated with immigrants (mostly Muslims), and have contributed to an increase in public anxieties. In March 2016, after the terrorist attack in Brussels, the Polish Prime Minister, Beata Szydło bluntly affirmed that Poland could not take part in the EU relocation programme. All these events raised two great debates: a long-standing one, questioning the overall approach of the European states to the integration of migrants<sup>98</sup> and the other related to the on-going refugee crisis, making the argument that terrorists may potentially exploit asylum-seeker routes to enter the EU. Even though many analysts agree that terrorists would rather look for safer routes to reach Europe or the United States, the scope of the phenomenon cannot exclude possible infiltrations a priori,<sup>99</sup> especially by means of fake documents. A similar argument (the risk of terrorist infiltrations) was used by Donald Trump in March 2017 when issuing an executive order blocking the citizens of six predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States.

Somehow linked to this problem is a third element which is the long-term impact of immigration on the composition of the European and US population. Indeed, the numbers are quite different: American society is already more multi-ethnic and multi-racial than its European counterparts, and it is expected to absorb many more migrants in the coming decades: by 2050, nearly 18% of the total US population is projected to

<sup>95</sup>See, for example, the sexual assaults during the New Year’s Eve celebrations in Cologne, Spiegel Online, ‘New Year’s Eve Attacks: Dozens of Women Sexually Assaulted in Cologne’, January 6, 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/cologne-shocked-by-sexual-assaults-on-new-years-eve-a-1070583.html>. The Cologne Prosecutor recently informed that most of the assaulters were asylum seekers.

<sup>96</sup>Nikolaj Nielsen, ‘Athens Ponders Defence Options on Migrant Crisis’, EUobserver, February 2, 2016.

<sup>97</sup>At the time of writing at least six countries (among which France, Germany and Austria) had temporarily reintroduced controls at borders, while some states seem to have reversed their traditional policy of welcoming refugees, see James Traub, ‘The Death of the Most Generous Nation on Earth’, Foreign Policy, February 10, 2016.

<sup>98</sup>Malik Kenan, ‘The Failure of Multiculturalism: Community Versus Society in Europe’, Foreign Affairs 94, no. 2 (2015): 21–32.

<sup>99</sup>See, for example, EurActive, ‘Islamic State Smuggling Terrorists among the Migrants? Unlikely, Say Experts’, August 28, 2015. While this link may be dismissed as propaganda, no doubts exist that the smuggling of migrants across the Mediterranean constitutes a source of revenue for Daesh.



be foreign born.<sup>100</sup> Immigration patterns and composition may be another factor in driving apart the allies, creating different internal security challenges. Migration towards the United States will be mainly Hispanic and Asian. According to some estimates, by 2050, 38% of Americans will belong to one of these two ethnic groups, while non-Hispanic whites will constitute less than half of the population.<sup>101</sup> European immigration, instead, will be mainly from North Africa and the Middle East with the Muslim population projected at 8% of the population by 2030.<sup>102</sup> Consequently, we could expect that different diasporas within the Members of the Alliance would force attention onto different geographical contexts.<sup>103</sup>

### **Implications for NATO: ‘beware but do not overdo’**

Migration might turn out to be the main demographic challenge NATO will have to face in the coming years, not only externally but also for internal dynamics. In Europe, the growing tensions associated with huge flows of immigrants might have important repercussions for the whole Alliance, the most negative of which are diverging threat perceptions (and thus strategic priorities) or even setbacks to EU integration (starting with Schengen, but with ‘negative spill overs’ in other areas). Not surprisingly, the Pentagon has been keeping a keen eye on these developments: in August 2015, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, affirmed that ‘this combination of a humanitarian refugee crisis mixed with the rise of violent extremism is a 20-year problem and must be addressed as such’, although recognizing that ‘we’re moving at a pace that is not keeping pace with that threat’.<sup>104</sup> Precisely because of the speed and the scope of the refugee crisis, NATO has (quite unexpectedly) taken the migration issue seriously, to the point that it has stepped into the EU humanitarian crisis and launched an operation to patrol the Aegean Sea and monitor the Turkey–Syria border, focusing mainly on migrant movements and smuggler activities.<sup>105</sup>

The long-term consequences of the Syrian civil war will be of no less importance: leaving behind a largely damaged country, it will take a long time before refugees could return to their territories, if they still wish to do so. In addition, the general turmoil that has been prominent in the MENA region since 2011 is not likely to end any time soon, with huge implications on people movements. Hence, NATO may be called to intervene more frequently in addressing both migration crises and their consequences in terms of instability in neighbouring countries.

The long-term consequences of different migration trends should be of great interest to NATO too. Following population dynamics, political orientations may change and become more worrying: the very same shared identity that has characterized the Atlantic Alliance since its onset may start to diverge.<sup>106</sup> As Kirkpatrick explained in one of the old debates

<sup>100</sup>US Census Bureau, *Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 2060*, Current Population Reports, March 2015, 25–114.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup>Conrad Hackett, *5 Factors about the Muslim Population in Europe* (Pew Research Center, November 17, 2015).

<sup>103</sup>Simon, ‘NATO’ Uncertain Future’.

<sup>104</sup>Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey, quoted by Jim Garamone, *Dempsey Worried about Refugee, Immigration Crisis in Europe* (US Department of Defence, August 18, 2015), <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/613982/dempsey-worried-about-refugee-immigration-crisis-in-europe>.

<sup>105</sup>See NATO, ‘Assistance for the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the Aegean Sea’, June 27, 2016, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_128746.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_128746.htm).

<sup>106</sup>Simon, ‘NATO’ Uncertain Future’.



about the transatlantic drift, while past demographic ties linked the United States with Europe, foreseeable trends will increasingly tie the United States to the Pacific and Latin America on the one hand, and Europe with Africa and the Middle East on the other, with significant consequences both for the internal resilience of the Alliance and its external projection.<sup>107</sup>

## Conclusion

Since the crisis in Ukraine in 2014, NATO has been facing an intense debate about its future, and specifically on how to reinterpret the equilibrium and the relationship among its three core tasks: collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security. Even a renewed focus on collective defence, invoked by many, can hardly mean going ‘back to the roots’, because NATO needs to perform in an environment that differs fundamentally from the Cold War in security, political, financial and military terms and one that requires substantial rethinking.<sup>108</sup>

This debate has been further reinvigorated by the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States of America:

After I am elected president, I will also call for a summit with our NATO allies, and a separate summit with our Asian allies. In these summits, we will not only discuss a rebalancing of financial commitments, but take a fresh look at how we can adopt new strategies for tackling our common challenges. For instance, we will discuss how we can upgrade NATO’s outdated mission and structure – grown out of the Cold War – to confront our shared challenges, including migration and Islamic terrorism.<sup>109</sup>

Indeed, beyond his harsh rhetoric, Trump is not alone in thinking that NATO suffers from the limits of an institution designed for a post-Second World War demographic and security context that is changing drastically and is set to change even more in the near future. In this article, the implications for NATO of demographic challenges has been explored.

‘External’ demographic trends (namely population growth, youth bulges, urbanization and migration) challenge the Alliance on at least three levels: the strategic context, the type of missions and the partnership structure. The emerging strategic context will be one in which ‘classical’ interstate conflicts will probably be less salient, while the interactions among demographic, socio-economic, political and environmental factors might mutually reinforce negative trends, disproportionately increasing the risk of internal conflict and humanitarian crises, and reducing society’s or the government’s ability to cope with them in many regions.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, migration will probably bring these challenges directly to NATO’s shores.

Consequently, there will be an increasing demand for NATO intervention in such areas as stabilization missions in highly populated countries, crisis management in overcrowded urban contexts (or mega-slums) and contingency plans for migration crises. These tasks, in turn, demand both a more cohesive and flexible alliance: politically strong, when decisions

<sup>107</sup>Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, ‘The Atlantic Alliance and the American National Interest’, *World Affairs* 147, no. 2 (1984): 3.

<sup>108</sup>For an overview, see Claudia Major, ‘NATO and European Security: Back to the Roots?’ (IAI working papers 15|53 – December 2015, [http://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/nato-and-european-security-back-roots#sthash.xPa7OFJP.dpuf\\_](http://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/nato-and-european-security-back-roots#sthash.xPa7OFJP.dpuf_)).

<sup>109</sup>‘Trump on Foreign Policy’, Trump speech at The National Interest on 27 April 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-foreign-policy-15960?page=show>.

<sup>110</sup>Shiloh Fetzek and Jeffrey Mazo, ‘Climate, Scarcity and Conflict’, *Survival* 56, no. 5 (2014): 143–70.

need to be made about how to deal with challenges both geographically and thematically distant from its core business; but open to cooperation with other organizations (the EU, AU, International Organization for Migration, etc.) better suited to certain tasks (migration monitoring, crisis prevention, state-building/democracy promotion, etc.) or even ready to integrate new (youthful, populous) partners when necessary. NATO's current activity in the Aegean Sea in support of EU efforts to manage migration flows is just one example, although perhaps unthinkable just a few years ago, of this possible evolution.

On the other hand, we highlighted how internal demographic challenges for the Alliance are (at least) as relevant and pressing as the external ones and often intertwine with the latter. Population growth, ageing dynamics and migration trends point to a 'transatlantic demographic divide' that – given current projections – is mostly growing. In addition, the analysis also highlighted important differences among the European NATO partners, often overlooked by both scholars and commentators: a division that is not between western and eastern Europe, between 'old Europe' and 'new members', but a new line between a 'growing Europe' (north-west + Turkey) and a 'declining Europe' (south-central-east + Germany) that cuts across the continent. The sum of these two demographic divides might have important consequences for NATO as a political–military institution.

The combination of population ageing and decline might indeed have relevant implications both in terms of the human and economic resources that some member states are willing to devote to defence, and in terms of strategic postures. The consequence might thus be a further complication of decision-making and burden-sharing within the Alliance, two sensitive problems already stressed by the current Trump administration and that will probably aggravate US isolationist temptations. Furthermore, there are the internal consequences of migration to take in account: on the one hand, migration is already creating a veritable crisis in the European pillar of NATO, due to the political consequences of domestic turmoil, interstate tensions and a concrete risk of setback in the EU integration process and on the other hand, due to the long-term impact of different migration trends, European and American societies are changing in ways that could dilute the transatlantic identity and change the external projections and priorities of the two sides.

Overall, the Alliance seems to be facing a demographic paradox: current external demographic challenges would require a cohesive and reinforced Alliance, strong on internal solidarity and effective in its independent and coordinated (with other organizations) action. However, internal demographics point to a more divided Alliance, where diverging population trends could lead to different security perceptions and defence choices. The ability to cope with both demographic challenges is one of the keys to NATO's future persistence and success.

## Acknowledgements

The research project was led by the University of Bologna (Italy), with the participation of the Bruno Kessler Foundation (Italy), the University of Warwick (United Kingdom), Sabanci University (Turkey) and Johns Hopkins University – SAIS (United States/Italy). A previous version of this paper was presented at the 9th Pan-European Conference on International Relations, Giardini Naxos, Italy, 23–26

September 2015. We are grateful to the participants and discussants for their comments and to James Sperling for insightful suggestions on an earlier draft.

## **Funding**

This work was supported by NATO Allied Command Transformation (ACT), through the Project 'PREDICT: Projections and Relevant Effects of Demographic Implications, Changes, and Trends' (2014) [grant SPO#139000515].