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The Graying of the Great Powers: Demography and Geopolitics in the 21st Century (Book Discussion)

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Edited Transcript—Richard Jackson

Well, I'm going to turn to the developing world and the context, obviously, in which the possibly -- the certainly aging and possibly weakening developed countries of a decade or two or three from now will be operating.

Of course the developed world, as Neil explained, is leading the way into this older future, but the developing world is also in the midst of what demographers call the demographic transition. The shift from high fertility and high mortality, the traditional norm, to low fertility and low mortality, the modern norm, a shift that seems to inevitably accompany economic and social development.

Worldwide -- let me back up again a second. Worldwide, since 1970, the fertility rate has fallen from 5.1. In the developing world, the fertility rate has fallen from 5.1 to 2.9. The population growth rate has dropped from 2.2 percent to 1.3 percent per year, and the median age has risen from 20 to 26. So, in the developing world as a whole, this trend is now well under way. This is obviously at a fundamental level a cause for hope and for optimism about the future, and for two reasons: First of all, there's the window of economic opportunity for economic growth and development that the demographic transition opens up. Think about it. What's the first thing that happens when fertility falls? You have fewer kids to take care of, right? So you free up adult time and especially the time of women for participation in the market economy. Over time, the share of the population in the working years rises, all other things being equal, that translates into higher per capita GDP. As more of the working age population moves into the higher saving middle years, you may get a boost to savings and investment and productivity growth. This dynamic is sometimes called the demographic dividend.

There's also the fading of what are often called youth bulges: the unusually large share of the population in the volatile young adult age bracket, sometimes measured as age 15 to 24,

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sometimes as age 15 to 29. It is a large literature that establishes the correlation between extreme youth, violence, instability, and stayed failure. Youth bulges are fading in much of the developing world now.

Yet, at the same time, the closer we looked at the demographic dynamics that are now unfolding, we realize that these positive developments that in the long term may be pushing the world toward greater peace and prosperity, in the near term raise certain concerns. And so this optimism has to come along with a couple of caveats.

The first caveat is that the timing and pace of the demographic transition varies greatly by country and region. Fertility's fallen much further in some regions than others. In fact, in some regions, it's hardly fallen at all. Thirty-four percent of the developing world's population now lives in countries with below replacement fertility. That's up from five percent in 1970, but 46 percent still lives in countries where the fertility rate is higher than three. So you have a -- countries moving through the demographic transition at very different paces leading to a very wide range in population outcomes over the next few decades.

In parts of the developing world where fertility has not fallen, mainly Sub-Saharan Africa and a scattering of poorer Muslim majority countries, places like Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, large youth bulges will persist well into the 2020s, and indeed well beyond that if fertility fails to fall in the future as the U.N. assumes that it will. Most of these countries amply demonstrated the correlation between ex

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At the same time, and this is something else we discuss in the book, and that's that journeys can be more dangerous than destinations. It may be that older age structures together with development over time push countries towards greater prosperity and greater stability, but it doesn't necessarily do so in a linear fashion. And, in fact, there is some evidence that the risk of conflict rises at first with income before it then falls. So there's a hump shaped relationship between development and conflict. And this should hardly be surprising. I mean, development economists are quite familiar with the fact that development itself gives rise to a whole series of social and economic stresses, that we see being played out now in different regions of the developing world. I mean, everything from mass internal migration to urbanization to rising income and equality to growing ethnic tensions to environmental degradation. And most of these stressors themselves exhibit a hump shaped relationship with respect to development.

There's also some evidence that this relationship is strongest for some of the most serious types of security threats that we face today, particularly international terrorism. Most of the terrorists don't come from the poorest countries. They come from disaffected middle classes in middling countries, international terrorism, neo-authoritarian reaction, as in the China model or in the Russian model.

There's also the problem of demographic competition. I think we need to push this towards a conclusion probably. So, let me just say a word or two about this. When fertility falls and population growth slows within a region or within a state, it doesn't do so at the same rate necessarily for all ethnic and religious groups within a given society. So you have a differential demographic trend often between groups with a long history of competition, of tension. I mean, Muslims and Hindus in India, Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, within

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middle income country, and its overtaking of the United States as the world's largest economy, at least measured in purchasing parity dollars. For those of you familiar with power transition theory, this could be a moment that is potentially rife with danger.

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