

Demographic Trends Affecting U.S Foreign Policy

Scribed by Swathi S. Saradha

Our speaker, Dr. Steven Philip Kramer, is a professor of National Security Studies at the Eisenhower School, National Defense University in Washington, D.C. From 1996-2002, he was a Senior Policy Advisor to the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs and in 2011, he was a Public Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center. He is the author of *The Other Population Crisis: What Governments Can Do About Falling Birth Rates* published by Wilson Center/Johns Hopkins Press in January, 2014.

Dr. Kramer says the birth rate in many counties around the world has been drastically decreasing. He says writing a book about declining birth rates may seem “absurd” when the growth of the world population is considered a challenge to sustainability. However, low birth rates are a long term problem for the future. Rapid population growth and declining birth rates are not trends as distinct as they might appear. Throughout much of history birth rates were high and death rates were high, resulting in low population growth. Disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes and war played a role. After the 1700s and the Industrial Revolution, better healthcare, sanitation and food led to lower death rates and populations increases. As poverty rates decline, the fertility rate or the number of births per woman also tends to decline (“demographic transition”). The birth rate in many countries, especially in Europe and East Asia, are below the replacement number of 2.1 necessary to sustain the population.

In writing his book, Dr. Kramer visited Sweden, France, Italy, Japan and Singapore. The birth rate of Europe and Japan is about 1.3, Germany 1.6 and Taiwan 1. The pyramid with a base of older people supporting the young is being turned on its head and will leave too few young to support too many old.

While some people don't see low birth rate as a problem, Dr. Kramer believes that countries must plan and address the situation. China instituted its one child policy to address overpopulation and is now seeing some of the negative effects of that policy. The Catholic Church in Italy does not seem to have had much of an effect on the birth rate. Singapore deals with its low birth rate by bringing in immigrants. In Japan, women are able to obtain jobs but if they have a child and leave to take care of the child, they may not get their job back. Because of

this, many Japanese women delay having children until they work and save up enough money.

To increase the birth rates, governments need to provide programs (health care, day care, preschool) to help women have children while continuing to work. France's birth rate, which is now higher than that of the U.S., has increased in part due to paid maternity leave, health care and other programs. These ideas are not new. In 1931, Sweden had a birth rate of 1.7 and realized that it needed to devote resources for maternity leave, health care and schooling. Many countries are now doing research and trying to find the best ways to increase the birth rate and stabilize the population for their future.

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