

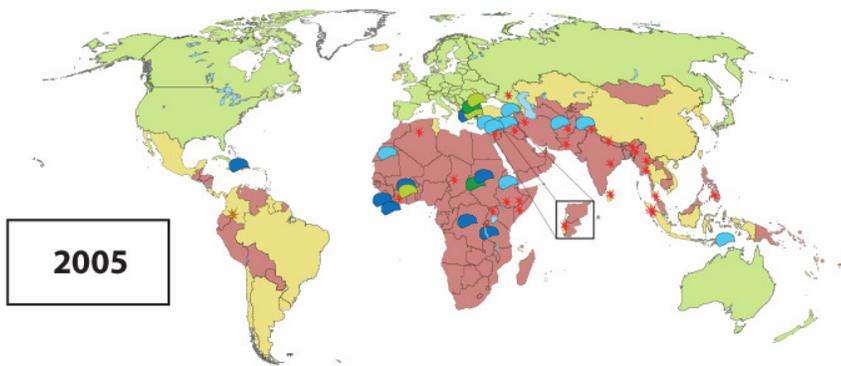
New Security Beat

Youth Bulge and Societal Conflicts: Have Peacekeepers Made a Difference?

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Age Structures and Intra-state Conflicts



Age Structures & Conflict		Peace Support Operations	
Country	Opposition in conflict		UN-led with Chapter VII authority
 Youthful	 Youthful		UN-led with armed troops
 Intermediate	 Intermediate, mature, or uncertain		Authorized by UNSC but not UN-led
 Mature			Noted/recognized but not UN-authorized

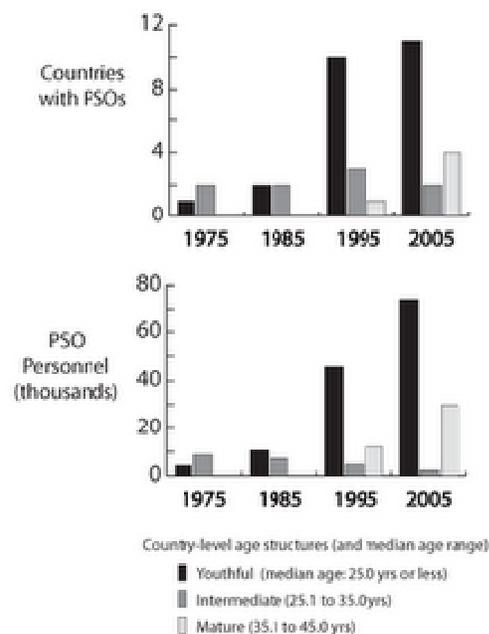
Until recently, the question of which countries are at the most risk of violent societal conflict could be answered with a terse, two-part response: “the young and the war-torn.” This simple characterization regarding youth and conflict worked well, until the first decade of the 21st century. The proportion of youthful countries experiencing one or more violent intrastate conflicts declined from 25 percent in 1995 to 15 percent in 2005. What’s behind this encouraging slump in political unrest? One hypothesis is that [peace support operations](#) (PSOs) – peacekeepers, police

units, and specialized observers that are led, authorized, or endorsed by the United Nations – have made a difference.

From the 1970s through the 1990s, more than 90 percent of all societal conflicts broke out in countries with a youthful age structure – a population with a [median age](#) of 25 years or less. And wherever civil and ethnic wars emerged, they tended to persist. The average societal conflict that began between 1970 and 1999 continued without a one-year break in battle-associated fatalities for about six years. Some – including the Angolan civil war, Northern Ireland’s “Troubles,” Peru’s war against the Shining Path, and the Afghan civil war – endured for decades. In contrast, inter-state conflicts that began between 1970 and 1999 lasted, on average, less than two years (see the [UCDP/PRIO Conflict Database](#)).

In the Aftermath of Intra-State Conflicts

Beginning in the early 1990s, however, there was a marked expansion in size and number of PSOs deployed in the aftermath of societal warfare, which appears to have dampened the persistence of some conflicts and prevented the reemergence of others. The annual number of active PSOs deterring the re-emergence of societal conflict jumped from just 2 missions during 1985 to 22 in 2005. In contrast, those led, authorized, or endorsed by the UN to maintain cease-fire agreements between neighboring states during that same period only increased from three active missions to four. By 2009, nearly 100,000 peacekeepers were stationed in countries that had recently experienced a societal conflict. About 70 percent were deployed in countries with a youthful population (see Figures 1A and B). Why the sudden expansion in use of PSOs?



According to [William Durch and Tobias Berkman](#), this upsurge was less a change of heart or modification of a global security strategy and more an outcome of the unraveling web of Cold War international relations. Before the 1990s, the majority of PSOs were United Nations-led operations that were mandated to monitor or help maintain cease-fires along mutual frontiers. Because insurgents were typically aligned with either the Soviets or a Western power, Security Council authorization to mediate a societal conflict was difficult to secure.

This situation changed with the breakup of the Soviet Union and the initiation of PSOs by regional organizations, including operations by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Liberia and Sierra Leone and the NATO-led Kosovo Force in 1998-99.

Demographic Forecasting

What do national demographic trends suggest for the demand for PSOs over the next two decades? For societal conflict, political demographers foresee that the demand for PSOs will continue to decline among states in Latin America and the Caribbean – with the exception of sustained risk in Guatemala, Haiti, Bolivia, and Paraguay. Similarly, demand for peacekeeping is expected to continue to ebb across continental East Asia.

Gauged by [age structure alone](#), the risk of societal warfare is projected to remain high over the coming two decades in the western, central, and eastern portions of sub-Saharan Africa; in parts of the Middle East and South Asia; and in several Asian-Pacific island hotspots – Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, and Solomon Islands. But even in some countries that are losing their youthful blush, domestic political relations could turn out less rosy than this simple age-structural model forecasts.

In other words, there are roadblocks to a “[demographic peace](#).” Among them is an increasing propensity for a specific demographic configuration of ethnic conflict: warfare between state forces and organizations that recruit from a minority that is considerably more youthful than the majority ethnic group. Examples of these conflicts include the Kurds in Turkey, the Shiites in Lebanon, the Pattani Muslims in southern Thailand, and the Chechens of southern Russia.

However, this twist on the [youth bulge model](#) of the risks of societal conflict is a discussion for another installment on *New Security Beat*. Suffice it to say that when political demographers look over the UN Population Division’s [current demographic projections](#), they see few signs of either the immediate waning of societal warfare, or the near-term withering of the current level of demand for PSOs.

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Sources: PRIO, The Stimson Center, UN Population Division.

Photo Credit: “UNMIS Troops Prepare to Patrol Town of Abyei, in Sudan,” courtesy of flickr user [United Nations Photo](#).