

**Demographic Decline**  
**The Challenges and Opportunities of an Aging Asia**

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## Abstract

Demographic change in East Asia will alter the political landscape for the region. While Japan and South Korea head towards the ‘third age’, China will face an increasing demand on its working population as only children must care for multiple older family members. For example, the Japanese Health Ministry predicts that the total population in Japan will decrease by 25% by 2050, and South Korea has been recently described as an “Aging Tiger” [Klassen]. What are the political implications of these changes? Are there inevitable trends and consequences? Some analysts argue that demographics are not destiny and that these shifts will have an unpredictable impact on international affairs in the region as evidenced by classical parallels [Holmes]. Other commentators point to the problems that the region will face as its working populations decrease and older societies are increasingly dependent on a shrinking demographic dividend [Eberstadt]. More optimistic views look toward a “geriatric peace” and show how ‘older’ modernized societies can still be very economically productive [Haas]. In the following study, the author will show how the demographic decline in East Asia will occur such that it presents both challenges and opportunities for the region. Looking at the shifting demography of the region displays the necessity for increased political cohesiveness in response to those changes. Using both quantitative analysis of the population dynamics and qualitative resources such as government policies and historical cases, the author will argue that the next 40 years will be pivotal to the region. Importantly, key regional players such as Japan, South Korea, and China will need to respond to their ‘demographic decline’ with an emphasis on improving relations with the United States and younger Southeast Asian nations. An aging Asia is an integral part of America’s “Pacific Century” [Clinton] and likewise requires an improved rapport with the US. Demography may not be destiny but it certainly offers a salient lesson about destination in East Asia.

## Introduction

International relations tend to be evaluated by scholars based on major power shifts in the global order. While states are typically the primary actors or units of analysis, population dynamics underlie those shifts. Importantly, the East Asian region is undergoing both significant geopolitical and demographic changes. Three major actors, Japan, South Korea, and China (People's Republic of China), face aging populations. In the following paper, I will describe those changes and suggest what some political consequences may be. The data I use is easily accessible from the United Nations (UN) population survey database. Much of the analysis comes out of a conference held in May 2012 at the United States (US) Naval War College. To begin, I will examine the population dynamics in Japan and South Korea. Following this analysis, the regional emergence of China and the fundamental shifts in its demographic composition will be the focus of the study. In the second part of the paper, I will suggest that the younger populations in Southeast Asia may hold the key for continued regional economic growth and reveal key political developments. By examining these 'new' allies, I will show how the future of Northeast Asian nations depends in a large part on their relationship with neighbors in the South.

In the end, I argue that aging populations in Japan and South Korea will likely lead to some demands on domestic governance. Shifting attention away from international affairs to deal with key issues such as elderly care and social safety nets will alter regional relations. The Chinese case holds different inferences and less sanguine potential scenarios. While several commentators have hypothesized a "geriatric peace", I will suggest that the political dynamics in China may take a more aggressive shift as the

older generation has a significant amount of nationalistic fervor that would sharpen both domestic demands and international affairs. Tensions in the region could come as China, when faced with domestic discord, would seek to externalize that discontent and as an increasingly nationalistic older generation starts to have a larger say in the overall population numbers. The high male to female ratio in China further complicates this situation. Finally, I will make the argument that Southeast Asian nations should be looked at as a way to continue Northeast Asian regional stability and growth. Furthermore, strong relations with the US will be necessary to offset a potentially decreasing political position. One cannot underestimate the impact of demographic population shifts on international affairs and Asian regional relations particularly as demographics can be seen as destiny in an aging Asia.

## **Part 1: Demographic Shifts, Aging Northeast Asia, and Political Change**

Geriatric peace in Japan

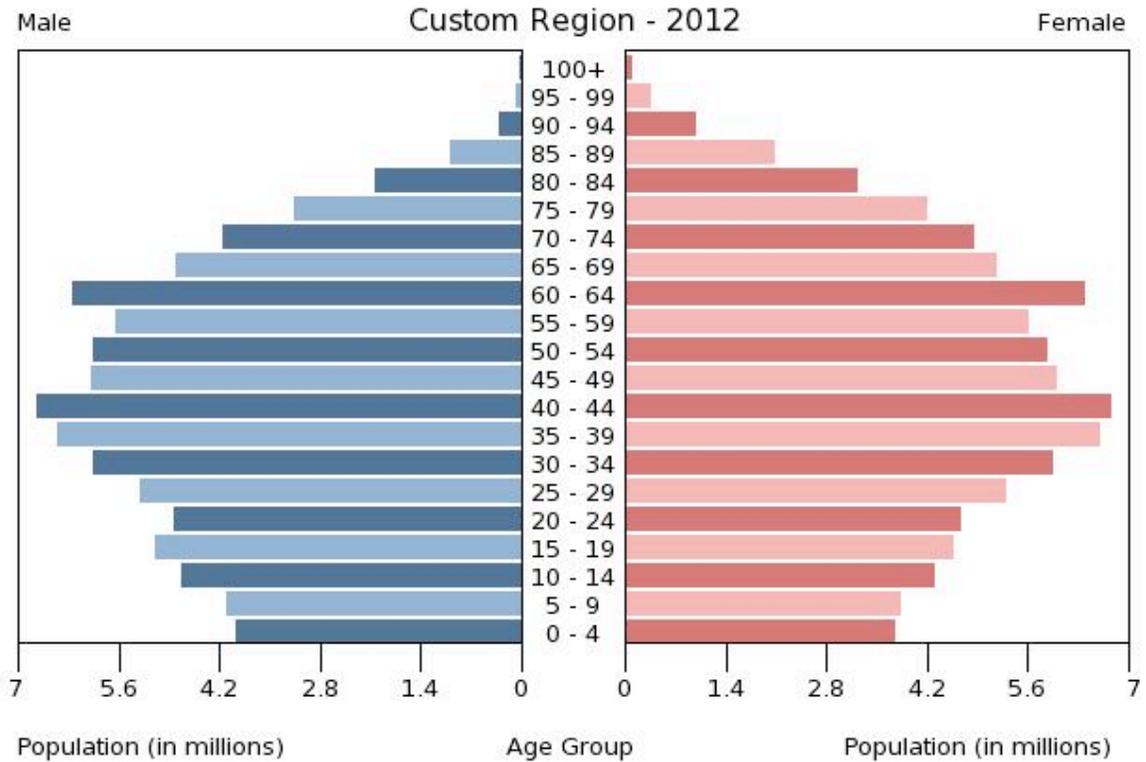
Demographics in East Asia

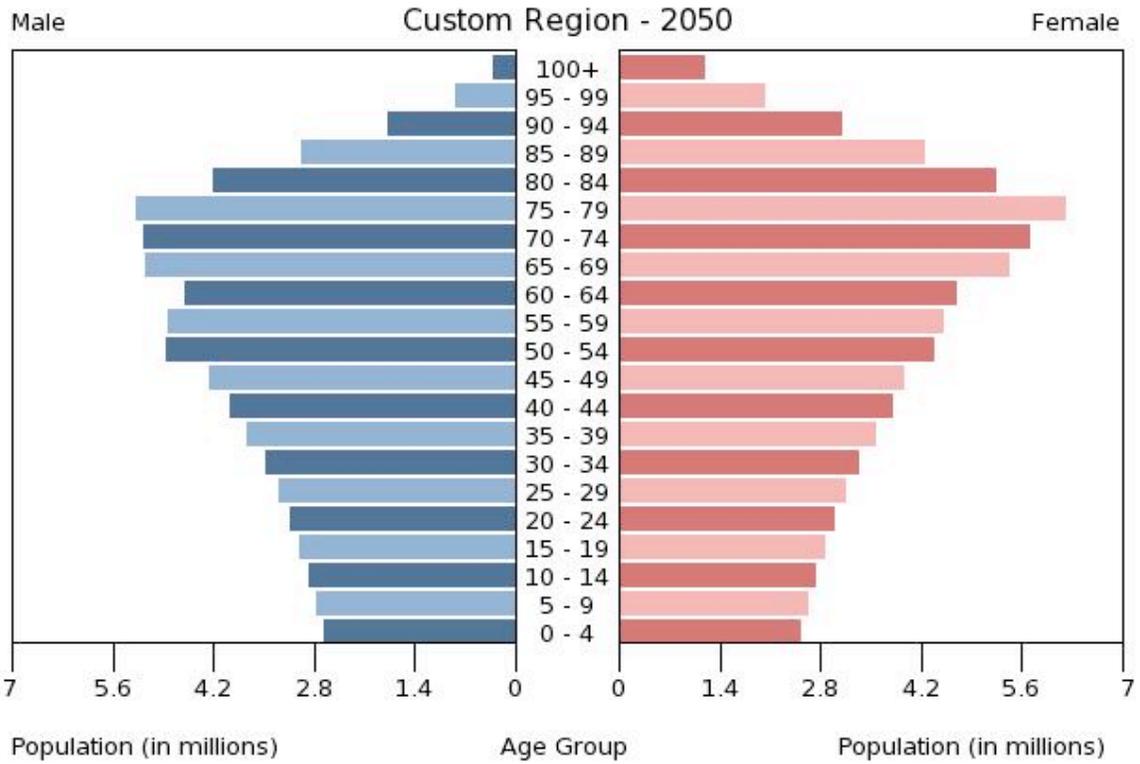
<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-08-21/china-entering-demographic-danger-zone-boj-official-says-2-.html>

Chinese regional aspirations

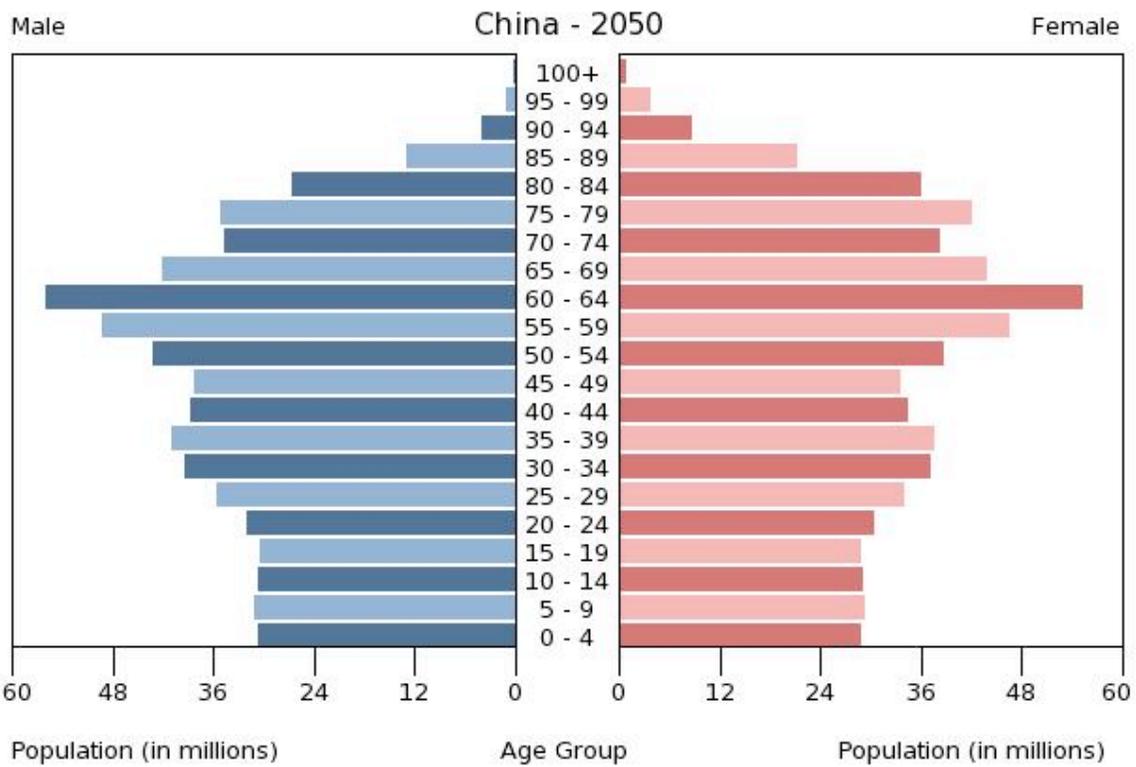
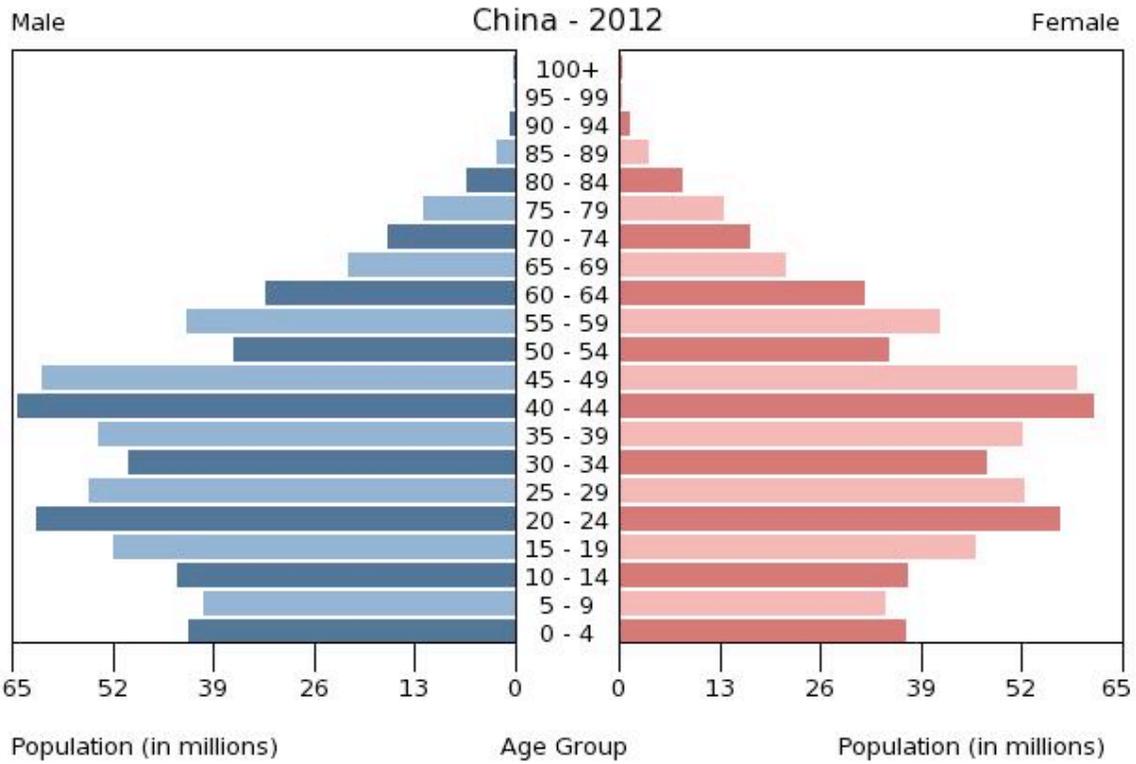
**Japan and South Korea**

For example, the Japanese Health Ministry predicts that the total population in Japan will decrease by 25% by 2050, and South Korea has been recently described as an “Aging Tiger” [Klassen].





China



## Part 2: Looking South

### The New Allies

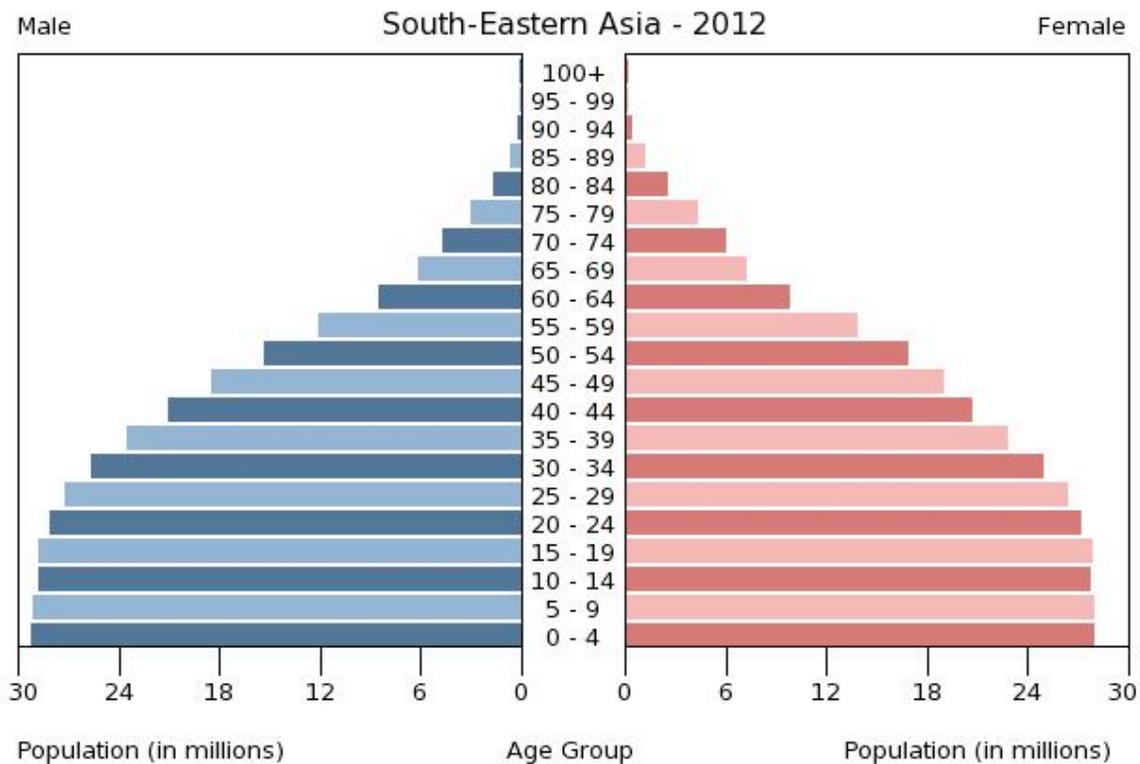
It's good to be young. Traditional US allies aging; look towards Southeast Asia

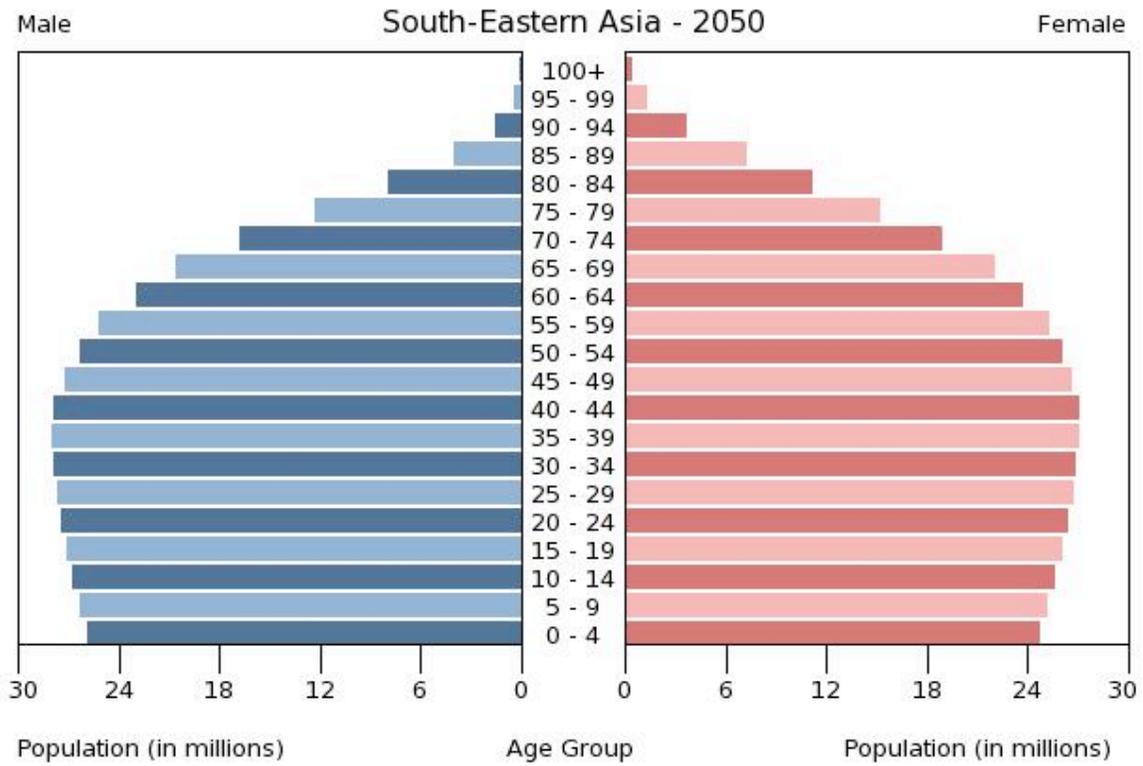
Attending a recent US Naval War College Conference ([link](#)) on Aging Asia.

Demographics may not be destiny, but it is destination. The US will see an aging population in traditional allies such as Europe also Pacific Asia with Japan and South Korea.

Demographic dividend or the section of the population which

Troops on the ground, active work force, ideological proclivity to match that of the US





Policy recommendations: in with the new and keeping ties strong with the old;  
 increased US public diplomacy in Southeast Asia targeting younger audiences;