

The Secret to U.S. Growth in the 21st Century: More Asians

A country is only as strong as its people, and we need more -- starting with Asia.

By Noah Smith, The Atlantic October 5, 2012 | 4:07 p.m.

What makes a country prosperous and strong in the long run? Four things: land, people, institutions, and culture. Most discussions these days focus on patching up America creaky institutions (health care, the Senate filibuster, etc.), but we should also be thinking about our plan for the long term. Here's a plan.

For most of its history, America was the "Alternative Europe." Political and religious dissidents who were dissatisfied with the ruling regimes in their homelands, oppressed ethnic minorities, and poor people who couldn't get a good job -- all made their way to the United States. Here they found a place where their beliefs, their ethnicity, and their parents' socioeconomic status mattered far less than in the Old Country. America itself benefited greatly from the inflow, gaining a huge labor force, a constant supply of entrepreneurs and creative free thinkers, and a diverse ethnic makeup that helped us avoid the kind of brutal ethnic violence and fragmentation that plagued the European subcontinent.

We also benefited from the strong relationships we built with European countries -- first Britain and France, then Germany and others. Our shared heritage helped facilitate trade and investment, which made our East Coast a center of global commerce. And it helped the U.S. to play an essential stabilizing role in the World Wars and the Cold War, which saved Europe from endemic warfare and from domination by totalitarian regimes.

In other words, "Alternative Europe" was a winning strategy for us. But that strategy is mostly played out. Europe today is rich, peaceful, and liberal, with higher economic mobility and ultra-low fertility. The United States still needs people -- to start new companies, to keep our pension systems funded, and to keep our domestic market large in order to attract investment. But we're not going to get our new people from Europe.

For the last few decades, we've been importing our new population from Mexico, but that too looks to be at an end. [Net immigration from Mexico has fallen to zero](#), thanks in large part to a healthy Mexican economy (good), lower Mexican fertility (good), the housing bust (bad), and nativist sentiment against "illegal" immigrants in states like Arizona (very, very bad).

America's birth rate is not as low as Europe, but we still need immigrants to ensure a healthily expanding labor pool. Where are we going to get our new Americans? Asia and Africa. Asia is especially important, and encouraging large-scale immigration from Asia will have benefits far beyond the simple economics of immigration. The United States' geopolitical strategy for the emerging Asian Century must be to position ourselves as the Alternative Asia, the way we were once the Alternative Europe.

ALT-ASIA

East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia together have over half the world's population, but Asians make up only 5% of the United States. If our ethnic makeup was a portfolio of stocks, we would be severely underweight Asia.

Asia is important not just because it is huge, but because it is growing rapidly. Trade with these countries will be incredibly important to the American economy this century. One way to facilitate trade and investment is ethnic ties -- witness the way the Chinese diaspora has invested in China, or the way Indian-American entrepreneurs have forged links between Silicon Valley and India. We need much more of this.

Geopolitics, too, will be centered on Asia. Already, conflicts over the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and Central Asia fill the news. The United States could be involved in stabilizing these conflicts and making sure they don't disrupt the global economy. In the 20th Century, we stabilized Asia through overwhelming military force, but this is no longer possible or desirable; instead, many believe, the U.S. should be an "offshore balancer," helping to mediate disputes and organize coalitions of Asian nations to keep the peace. But in order to do this we need to build credibility and trust with the nations of Asia, and having large Asian populations in our own country seems like a good way to do this. Allowing young, disaffected Asians to migrate here should also reduce the domestic pressures that fuel unrest and conflict.

Furthermore, I believe that the cultural benefits of Asian immigration will be just as big as the economic and political benefits. Adding diversity to our melting pot will speed up America's inevitable and necessary transition from a "nation of all European races" to a "nation of all races." The sooner that happens -- the sooner people realize that America's multi-racialization is a done deal -- the quicker our political debate can shed its current ethnic overtones and go back to being about the issues.

50 MILLION MORE, PLEASE

Asians want to come to America. According to the [most recent Gallup survey](#), the United States is the desired destination for 22 million Chinese people, 10 million Indians, 8 million Bangladeshis, 5 million Filipinos, and 3 million people from Vietnam. These are the kind of numbers we need to keep our economy young and growing.

Surprisingly, 5 million Japanese people would also move here, given the chance. Having lived in Japan, I don't find this surprising. Although Japan is in many ways a freer country than the U.S. -- you can drink alcohol outside, for example, or shoot fireworks from your roof -- many Japanese workers feel oppressed by their stifling corporate culture. America should be a home not just for people seeking a job, but a refuge for free thinkers and iconoclasts seeking to escape the invisible fetters of tradition. These people tend to be entrepreneurs, innovators, and agents of positive change here in America.

But we need to act now, because the window of opportunity for large-scale Asian immigration will not stay open for much longer. Asian nations are getting rich, which means better opportunities in their home countries. They are also aging rapidly. In China and much of East and Southeast Asia, fertility is at or below European levels. We probably have only two more decades in which to transplant large numbers of Asians to our shores. (This is in contrast to Africa, whose high fertility levels will make sure it remains a plentiful source of immigrants for at least another century.) Fortunately, we are on the right track; in 2010, America received an estimated 430,000 immigrants from Asia, outnumbering even Hispanics. But with 60 million Asians clamoring at our gates, we could stand to admit a lot more.

This, then, is the "Alternative Asia Plan." America began as a nation of Europeans and Africans; it is now a nation of Europeans, Africans, and Latin Americans. It must become a nation of Asians as well. Failing to do this would mean shutting ourselves off from the master narrative of the 21st Century.