



What America's demographic future means for Africa and Europe

US demographic decline could reshape the global balance of power

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The Future of African-European Relations - A Joint Project of



American demographic decline

The world order is undergoing a profound transformation, in part because of the changes occurring among the people who comprise it. In 1975, Europe represented roughly one-sixth of the world's population, and Africa roughly one-tenth. The total US population, meanwhile, was more than half the size of Africa's combined population. The median age in Europe was just over 30 years, in the US about 28 years, and in Africa roughly 16 years. Fast forward to today, and the average European is over 40 years old, the average American is about 38 and the average African is just 20. Africa's population today is nearly double that of Europe's and over four times that of the US. Africa's population and its resulting labour force continue to grow rapidly, as Europe's shrinks and ages in the process.

The US, it has been thought, did not share the fate of a collective “West,” with a population that has been growing and was expected to continue to grow, albeit not as fast as Africa. Given recent political developments in the US, however, these expectations may soon change, with America joining a collective Western demographic decline – and a decline in global power.

The “American dream” has, for generations, held appeal for immigrants from Africa, Europe and beyond, contributing toward a burgeoning US population and ever-growing labour force. That dream, however, appears as if it will soon fade away. This is at least what recent immigration statistics from the US Census Bureau suggest, which show a historic decline in net immigration into the US and, [they caution](#), ‘are trending toward negative net migration’—a first in over half a century.

US President Donald Trump’s first year in office was “record-breaking,” [according](#) to his administration. While they were referring to the estimated 3 million undocumented immigrants who have reportedly departed the US since January 2025, this superlative applies equally to the dramatic shift in America’s demographic trajectory, with important implications for the future power potential of the US that will affect its role globally if current trends hold. Contrary to the [forecast](#) by the world’s premier demographic forecasting organisation, the United Nations Population Division, the US population may soon be in decline.

These trends matter far beyond the US. As demographic change reshapes the relative power of major actors, it will influence how Europe, China and African countries position themselves in an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment.

The idea of an America in *relative* decline has been [discussed](#) and [debated](#) for many years. An America in *absolute* decline, if only in demographic terms, is a new topic altogether, only [recently](#) getting attention in policymaking circles—and yet its implications for geopolitical competition would be profound.

People power

Many factors determine whether a country is a major global power: diplomacy, information, military capabilities, and economic size and sophistication (referred collectively to as DIME) are prominent examples. Underpinning these factors, especially economic ones, is demographics, which includes whether a country has a large, relatively well-educated and healthy labour force. A large labour force, in particular, while not independently sufficient to make a country a great power, remains necessary.

As political scientist Michael Beckley [observes](#), ‘Luxembourg, for example, will never be a great power, because its workforce is a blip in world markets and its army is smaller than Cleveland’s [Ohio, US] police department.’ Even though its workforce was nearly ten times as productive as that of China in 2002, according to [World Bank statistics](#), Luxembourg’s [economy](#) was one-sixtieth the size of China’s due to the latter’s demographic mass.

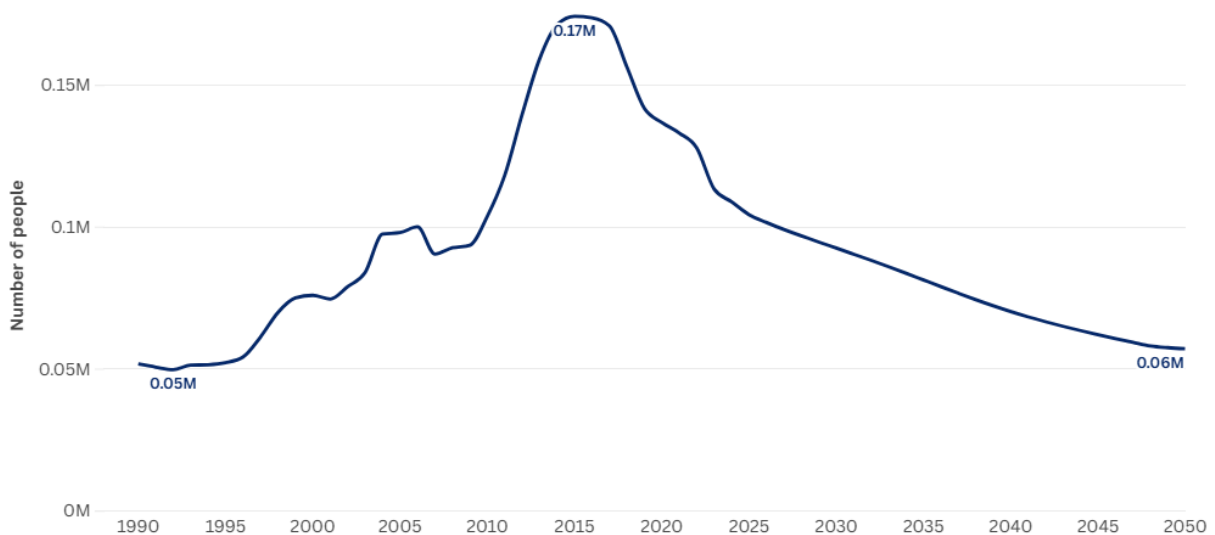
For most of readers’ lifetimes, outside the Global Financial Crisis and COVID-19 pandemic, the [US labour force](#) has experienced a stable year-over-year increase. This has largely been due to the persistent growth of the [US population](#). Population size, in turn, results from three factors: births,

deaths and net migration. Births increase population, deaths decrease population, and the difference between the two is referred to as “natural” population growth. Migration either increases or decreases a population, depending on whether the net value is positive (more people immigrate than emigrate) or negative (the reverse).

In 2030, the US Congressional Budget Office [projects](#) that “natural” population growth in the US will turn negative as deaths outpace births. When this happens, positive US population growth will require net positive inward migration. Yet, as the US Census Bureau has stated, immigration into the US is on the opposite trajectory. Indeed, despite Africa’s population growing by more than two per cent each year (over double the world average), migration from Africa to the US has been on the decline in recent years and is forecast to continue declining even as Africa’s population continues to grow. Migration from Africa to Europe is also limited, though larger than to the US, given geographic proximity and colonial history.

Historical and forecasted migration flows from Africa to US: 1990-2050

Five-year moving average of annual flows in millions of people



Historical data: Thomas Gaskin and Guy Abel, "Deep learning four decades of human migration," Forecasts: International Futures

National power can, of course, grow even in the face of shrinking populations—today’s China being a case in point—as increases in capital and advances in technology offset demographic headwinds. The extent to which this would likely be the case for the US (and Europe) under alternative migration futures can be simulated.

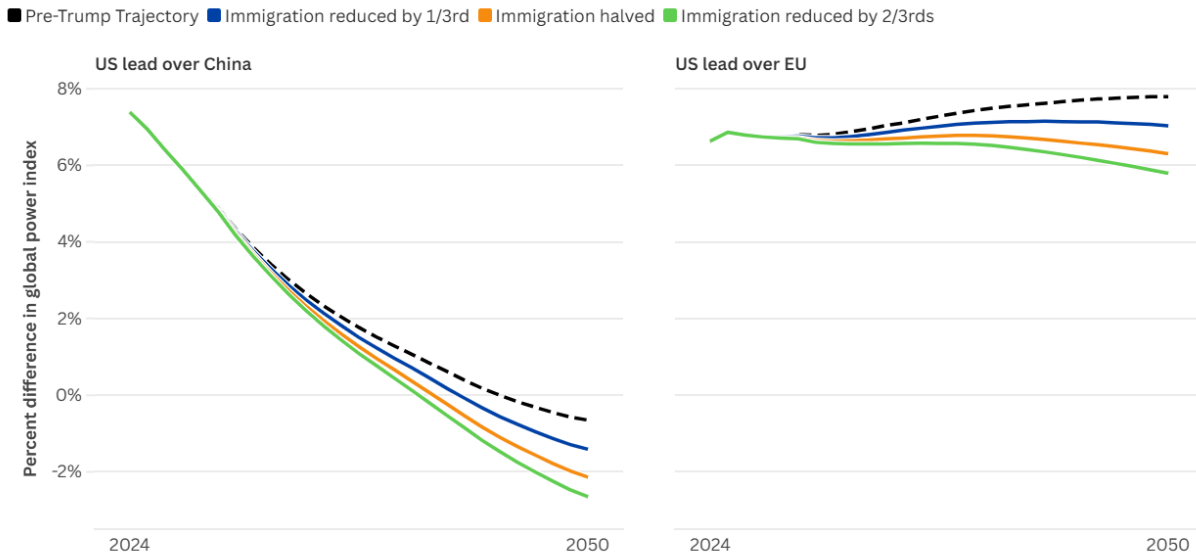
Lower immigration means lower growth and less national power

Alternative scenarios forecasted with the [International Futures](#) (IFs) tool—a complex, quantitative modelling platform that allows users to better understand the implications of changing, deeply interconnected demographic, economic and other trends—can illustrate the implications of varying

US immigration policies. For example, compare a pre-Trump 2.0 trajectory with scenarios in which immigration into the US is alternatively reduced by one-third, one-half or two-thirds. On a pre-Trump 2.0 trajectory, the US population was projected to continue to grow well past mid-century. In any of these three alternative migration scenarios, however, the US population growth shrinks to zero and in the latter two cases begins a long, relentless decline.

The US's lead on the world stage in terms of measurable material capabilities was already in relative decline as other powers, especially China, have grown their own material capabilities at a much faster absolute pace. A shrinking US population will, however, accelerate that pace, as illustrated by long-term forecasts of a composite index of DIME-related factors which collectively measure [national power](#). Meanwhile, a gradually growing relative US lead over the EU, coupled with a lower future immigration to the US, would cement the current US-EU power dynamic, with the EU perhaps even slightly narrowing its power gap with the US. These trends are illustrated in the following chart, which depicts the difference in the per cent of global power (including a demographic contribution) held by the US over that held by China and the EU, as measured by the Global Power Index and forecast across alternative scenarios in IFs.

The US's lead in global power over the EU and China: 2024-2050



Source: International Futures, v. 8.47, [Pardee Institute Global Power Index](#)

A new world order

The Trump administration's visa bans and other restrictive immigration policies have already damaged US relations with the Global South, [including across Africa](#). Forecasts suggest that those policies, if maintained, will further weaken the US position in the long term, as a shrinking workforce and [less innovation](#) hamper the US economy. Indeed, the immediate damage to America's image is salt on a longer-term, deeper structural wound now inflicted by a suddenly much bleaker

US demographic outlook. And the pain intensified with the closure of USAID, reductions in humanitarian assistance and on-off trade agreements such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). A demographically weaker and less internationally engaged US will leave a vacuum in Africa that others will fill.

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Whether China can take advantage of a weaker US position is uncertain, but early indications suggest it will. Take China's preparation for the upcoming Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) as an example. [According](#) to the China-Global South Project's Eric Olander, while the forum used to have its agenda effectively dictated by the Chinese, preparations for next year's 10th FOCAC have so far been explicitly collaborative, ensuring African partner perspectives shape the conversation. This is despite China possessing far more national power today than during the first FOCAC in October 2000, and may be a sign that China intends to cultivate both its hard and soft power capabilities, as evidenced by China's decision to allow duty-free access for African exports.

The EU, meanwhile, possesses collective national power capabilities roughly on par with China today, though it is forecast to gradually fall farther behind. Unless the EU becomes a truly independent—and collective—hard power in its own right, contrary to current forecasts, its path to remaining relevant in Africa and elsewhere must be paved with its own soft power. In this vein, the latest EU-AU Summit holds promise, particularly if [commitments](#) such as treating migration as an opportunity rather than a challenge are followed through on by both sides. If instead the EU shuns migration from Africa, Europe's own demographic decline, which is already in progress, will accelerate and thus, like the US, its decline in global power.

The implications extend beyond the major powers themselves and will also shape the future of Africa-Europe relations. As US influence evolves and global power becomes more dispersed, Africa's strategic importance will grow. This could create new opportunities for African governments to strengthen their leverage in trade, investment and diplomatic engagement. For Europe, remaining a relevant partner may require deeper, more mutually beneficial cooperation rather than relying solely on historical ties. Migration, critical minerals, energy cooperation and investment are likely to become increasingly important areas through which these regions navigate a changing geopolitical landscape.

How Africa and Europe respond to these changes may prove just as important as the shifts themselves. Demographic trends shape the distribution of power between major actors and the choices available to partners. In this context, strengthening long-term partnerships, mutual understanding and sustained policy dialogue will be as important as economic or security engagement in shaping the future of EU-Africa relations.

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This article is part of the Spotlight series in the project, The Future of African-European Relations.

The Future of African-European Relations project examines how the two regions can build stronger partnerships in an era of geopolitical fragmentation, economic competition and changing global power dynamics. It is a collaboration between the African Futures & Innovation Programme at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), the Federation of German Industries (BDI), the Hanns Seidel Foundation and the Megatrends Afrika consortium, comprising the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) and the Kiel Institute for the World Economy. Drawing on the expertise, research and analytical frameworks of the participating institutions, the project explores how different global futures could shape trade, investment, development cooperation and shared prosperity between Africa and Europe - and it aims to develop policy recommendations for different stakeholders.

Disclaimer: Opinions expressed reflect the views of authors, not necessarily those of the organisations partnering in the project, The Future of African-European Relations.

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