Redrawing the map

Dr Parag Khanna, founder of FutureMap, talks to Chris Seekings about how climate change, mass migration, globalisation and other powerful trends will force us to reimagine the world map

Political scientist, futurist, geographer and best-selling author, Dr Parag Khanna is impossible to pigeonhole. He has been named one of *Esquire*'s '75 Most Influential People of the 21st Century' and featured in *WIRED*'s 'Smart List', with his TED Talks and media appearances a testament to his impact on global strategic thinking.

This has culminated in his latest book, *Move: Where People Are Going for a Better Future*, in which he describes how climate change, mass migration and various other powerful megatrends will force us to reimagine the world map.

There will be "winners and losers" in this era of radical change, he says, and success will depend on how prepared nations are for the upheaval in a climate-disrupted world.

Peak humanity

Having travelled to more than 150 countries, Khanna is well-placed to speculate on the future impacts of climate change and mass migration. He is also the founder of FutureMap, advising governments and corporations on the dynamics of globalisation.

"I've always been interested in migration, connectivity and human geography because I've been a traveller my whole life, and worked and lived all over the world," he explains. "So I'm a kind of living case study of globalisation, and the book is about how human geography will unfold amid demographic imbalances and a population plateau, as climate migration accelerates at the same time."

We speak just weeks after the UN announced that the global population had reached 8 billion, with the figure expected to hit 9 billion in the mid-2030s, and 10 billion by 2080. However, Khanna is not convinced that the number will ever reach that high.

"The fertility curve has been trending downwards very rapidly since the 1960s and 1970s. It just takes a couple of generations for it to be really felt," he explains. "The world population is not likely to reach 10 billion people because there are so many forces that have been underestimated, such as female empowerment, urbanisation, the cost of living and, of course, concerns about the economy and climate change."

He says that we have entered an era of 'peak humanity' and a period of radical change. "We've already produced the largest generation of human beings that will ever live, and the only reason the population of the world is not already declining is because of higher life expectancy at the top end."





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On the move

From an environmental perspective, some may welcome the global population soon reaching its peak. However, Khanna believes that the growth of the global middle class, even with a smaller population, could be devastating.

"If you only had 6 billion people, but they all lived like Americans, the planet would have been destroyed many times over already," he explains. "It doesn't take 10 billion people to destroy the planet; it takes 3 billion over-consumers. So it's not really about numbers; it's about consumption."

As we reach peak humanity, he says that we are likely to see a vast increase in climate refugees. According to the UN, approximately 21.5 million people have been forcibly displaced by weather-related events – such as floods, storms, wildfires and extreme temperatures – every year since 2008. The Institute for Economics and Peace predicts that 1.2 billion people could be displaced globally by 2050 due to climate change and natural disasters.

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As a result, Khanna raises the prospect of "vacant states", with whole nations no longer meeting the definition of statehood because they no longer have a permanent resident population or recognised borders. He cites Yemen, Eritrea and Bolivia as countries that may one day be rendered completely uninhabitable. "And South Sudan – ironically, one of the world's youngest and newest countries – faces such an array of climate-related challenges that one wonders why anyone lives in South Sudan at all."

Another feature of peak humanity will be huge competition for workers, according to Khanna, who asserts that countries most resilient to climate change will be most attractive to economic migrants.

Winners and losers

Whatever your views on migration, Khanna believes that it will be increasingly necessary for countries to appear attractive to workers as the global population plateaus. "The winners of the 21st century will be the societies that attract young people, and the losers will be those that scare away young people – that's an iron law of history," he says. "America was the 20th century's biggest winner, but probably not the 21st century's, which I would say is more likely to be Canada or Northern Europe."

Despite the pessimism of many Europeans, Khanna explains how Europe

has better climate prospects than most, and is more committed to an ecosystem of clean, renewable energy. And although no country or region will be spared the impacts of climate change, he says the adaptive capacity of Northern Europe should see it fare better than most.

"But there is plenty of space in the world for many winners, such as Central Asia or Japan – places that are investing in adaptation, which includes water desalination, genetically modified seeds, portable nuclear power devices and stations, rainwater collection and wastewater treatment, hydroponic agriculture, and mobile real estate. The migration of people will be towards safe, stable, resilient geographies."

As for the losers, he believes that some 'vacant states' will simply be mined for their sand, salt and minerals, while others will be places where we dump nuclear waste. "And then there are the small island states that sink and simply cease to exist. They've been wiped off the map. All of the above are going to happen."

Although there were some positive adaptation initiatives announced at the COP27 climate summit last November – including the ground-breaking agreement to develop a 'loss and damage' financing facility for developing nations – Khanna says that adaptation still receives "far too little" financial investment.

"You heard about adaptation more at COP27; was it progress by the metrics of these summits? Sure, but the bar is very low. The fact that they're talking about a loss and damage fund to me is more of a sign of political rhetoric," he says. "The solution is not fancy summits where diplomats show up in private planes, wasting time and dancing at meetings, which I have no patience for whatsoever."

Mobility as a human right

Despite the apparent benefits of immigration, it is clear to see that many countries have become increasingly hostile to the free movement of people over recent years. The result is often tragic, as many lose their lives while attempting to enter countries illegally – something that is sadly likely to become more frequent as the impacts of climate change intensify.



Severe weather events in countries such as South Sudan and Pakistan (below) have displaced millions of people, according to the UN



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Although Khanna knows it is a political impossibility, he argues that the ability to move between countries freely should be a basic human right. "There are so many societies in the world where we complain about their human rights, and know that their political regimes will not improve," he says. "So if you actually believe those people deserve human rights, and you subscribe to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states very clearly that every human being has the right to exit their state, then logically, morally and legally, you are obliged to believe that mobility is the fundamental human right. People will not attain the rights that you believe they should have unless you physically allow them or enable them to move."

However, he adds: "It's the last thing that will ever, ever be globally coordinated or regulated. We will have a joint moon colony of all the states in the world, including all rival nations and geopolitical combatants, but they will never, ever agree on a global migration accord."

Despite this reality, Khanna explains how politicians will find it increasingly

difficult to control the flows of migration between countries. "We call the 19th century the 'age of nationalism'; well, it was also an age of staggeringly large migration," he continues. "These forces have never been, and will never be, antithetical. They're related to demographics, labour markets, conflicts and refugee flows and climate change, so borders really don't hold back people for very long."

The new map

As the climate warms, places that are currently uninhabited may soon be home to millions of people, according to Khanna. He says that parts of Russia and Canada may see a particularly large influx over the coming decades as temperatures rise. "It may not be permanent, but seasonal, with more nomadic movement where people go to places for a few months at a time – we will always be moving is really the punchline."

In 50 years, he says that borders, countries and the populations of those countries will have changed. "The latitude and longitude geocoordinates of the 9 billion people in the world of the year 2050 will be a different scrambled rearrangement of today's locations, he says. "That's what is so unique about the next decades of human history compared to any previous period of history, and I want us to be prepared for that."



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For example, Bulgaria has one of the fastest-declining populations in the world, and the composition of the people living there could soon be completely different. "They'll be Turkish. They'll be Asian. They won't be Bulgarian. So maybe they'll choose to rename what you think of as Bulgaria – it won't be the first time in history," he continues. "I'm interested in the future of all human geography and thinking about which map net makes most sense for the future population."

Khanna is hesitant to label his assertions as 'predictions', and instead says they are outlines of a number of scenarios that could unfold over the coming decades. "There is a scenario where we all fight water wars, and where many more people die in the Mediterranean than already have," he says. "Then there is a what I call the 'Northern Lights' scenario of a peaceful circulation of the world population according to the principles of sustainability and mobility. That's what I advocate for. I don't believe that it's necessarily what's going to happen, but we can try."



Adaptation measures, such as hydroponic agriculture, are helping some countries mitigate some of the effects of climate change

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