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## Why millions of our grandchildren will be moving back from the ocean and heading north

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As the fog lifts from what was achieved during last week's international negotiations over controlling climate change, some outlines of future reality come into focus. Layers of carbon pollution girding the Earth will continue to drive up temperatures and sea levels. The world's 195 countries will not be able to change human behavior enough to stop major climate change. By later this century, billions of people will face pressure to move away from eroding seashores to higher ground and north to cooler places to live.

There are several reasons to expect this.

Most countries lack the political will and ability to reduce the use of fossil fuels within their boundaries, much less by mutual agreement with others. Witness the trouble governments have had in mandating Covid vaccinations for which the benefits and costs are much more concrete and immediate than going through the "creative destruction" and pain of transforming energy infrastructure and reducing consumption.

Negotiators at the climate change bargaining table have quite different interests. While [small island nations](#) are already disappearing into the ocean, the warming climate will also create net winners. Habitable land in Russia and Canada is likely to expand severalfold. Siberia someday could be real estate a hot spot. Former President Trump knows this. He offered to buy Greenland.

Russia will be able to open northern ports and shipping lanes across the already ice-free Arctic Ocean. No wonder its cynical president says that doing nothing other than keeping the mother country's forest cover for its carbon absorption is a sufficient contribution to international efforts to reduce airborne pollution. Countries whose deserts will expand, and arable land contract, may be fortunate Putin hasn't thought of burning piles of old tires to speed up the heating process.

As delegates haggled in Scotland, [China](#) was ramping up its use of coal, already the source of more than half its power generation. And the [Biden Administration](#) was preparing to hold the largest offshore oil and gas lease sale in U.S. history on Nov. 17.

Oil, natural gas, and coal producing nations and regions will fight higher taxes or production limits. Corporations that produce energy have an enormous amount of influence on the U.S. and other governments, which are sensitive to voter anger caused by energy shortages and [price increases](#).

Developing countries are demanding [transfer payments](#) from industrial and post-industrial mega polluters whose economic growth was powered by fossil fuels. While developed nations are reluctant to pay up, they assume low-income countries can somehow achieve growth without increasing global pollution levels.

The discipline needed for sovereign nations to act in concert to cut fossil fuel emissions requires workable tools for measurement and enforcement of limits. Cheating, misclassification, and underreporting will abound. Europe's accounting, for example, promotes [burning wood](#) as a "renewable resource" superior to coal even though it leaves a larger carbon footprint. On a macro level, setting targets involves uncertainty since scientists can only roughly estimate how fast warming will occur and cannot know what might have happened if carbon levels had stayed the same or dropped. Absence of hard, agreed-upon baselines and targets will make progress yet more elusive.

The likely failure of independent nations to achieve a negotiated solution begs the question of creating a worldwide authority with the power to mandate changes in national behavior. But the emergence of China as a rival to U.S. hegemony and fragmentation of other spheres of influence would seem to make global governance less likely, unless perhaps one or more major powers becomes aggressively expansionist and imposes its will. Note that dictatorships and empires have not done particularly well at pollution control in the past.

In light of this incomplete list of obstacles facing national leaders trying to slow global warming, physics and political analysis indicate that sea levels and average temperatures will rise enough that a significant share of the population will have to relocate, or desire to. At very least, coastal infrastructure will have to be rebuilt, perhaps many times.

If most of us were still [hunter-gatherers](#), the consequences of the warmer world might not be too severe. Tribes could migrate inland and toward cooler places. There would be occasional conflicts as territories shifted. Today, humans and nations have crisscrossed the planet with precise lines demarking property rights at the root of their wealth and power. Motivating millions of dislocated people to cross those lines in order to survive and prosper is likely to have painful consequences. The world's physical and political maps may soon look much different.

The biggest losers in the warmer world will be the [poorer nations](#) and low-income people everywhere. They have the least capacity to relocate or pay the cost of higher energy taxes and cleaner technology to slow down the process. They will be more likely to get sick and die in heat spells and from the spread of tropical diseases or go hungry if hotter temperatures make it harder to produce food.

If governments raise gasoline and other [carbon taxes](#) to suppress demand, high-income and wealthy people have the capital to switch to hybrid vehicles and other cleaner technology and break even in the long run. Low-income will be stuck with used fuel guzzlers. Higher energy costs will cut disproportionately into their incomes and ability to save. Widening inequality already has relegated almost half the [U.S. workforce](#) to the low-income category.

As leaders try to move through the obstacle course toward pollution limits, a parallel course of action for the richest nations could be developing and sharing cleaner technology affordable for low- and middle-income people. Urgent funding for a "Manhattan Project" to design ways to cool and heat the world's homes and get people living at the margin to work could play a key role in the climate change saga to come.