Insight summaries

Insight #9: Collapse - Is human civilisation unravelling?

The question 'Is modern civilisation unravelling?' has become highly topical, with concerns about the stability of modern civilisation reaching unforeseen heights following the inception of a new administration in the US and ongoing wars in Europe and the Middle East. Anxieties are also being inflamed by humanity's existential risks ramping up – nuclear war, artificial super intelligence, climate change, global pandemics, and ecosystem collapse – pushing the Doomsday Clock ever closer to midnight.

In Insight 9 we examined the rise and fall of over thirty past civilisations to see what we can learn and what can help us today. We found that a 'life cycle' of rise, peak and fall occurred in all past civilisations- so it seems that a fall of modern civilisation is likely if not inevitable. History also tells us that the power, extent, duration, sophistication, and military strength of a civilisation cannot ultimately protect it from collapse.

To answer the question of whether modern civilisation is showing signs of unravelling, and where we sit on the life cycle of civilisation, we define our understanding of 'modern civilisation'. We also examine today's existential risks, similarities and dissimilarities between today's risks and those of past civilisations, what can be learnt and what is different today. We further examine both positive and negative megatrends currently at play, ensuring we are not overly drawn to a pessimistic view by recognising humanity's great achievements and future possibilities.

What have we learnt from the rise and fall of past civilisations?

Some of the key lessons that are relevant to the viability of civilisation today and our future are:

- All past civilisations have risen and fallen
- Civilisations can end in several ways- collapse and disappear, return to something close to their original form, evolve into a radically different society, or be subsumed by another civilisation
- The size, longevity, technological advancement, complexity and sophistication of a civilisation is no protection against its collapse
- Competition between civilisations can be beneficial but also lead to their demise
- Empowerment of conquered nations can lead to them turning on the coloniser, bringing the civilisation or empire to an end
- Collapse can be a normal phenomenon of complex adaptive systems like civilisations, or sometimes it can just be bad luck
- Collapse can be emancipating, spawning new opportunities for the oppressed or new ways to deal with challenges.

There are some factors that have played a key role in the downfall of past civilisations and are relevant indicators for society today:

- **External shocks:** traditionally known as the 'four horsemen'- war, natural disasters, famine and plagues, are all prevalent today
- **Climate change** and climate variability, especially droughts, undermining societal viability
- **Environmental degradation** and profligate resource use- exceeding human carrying capacity
- **Inequality and oligarchy** - power and wealth concentration creating social stress
- **Complexity** - resulting in an over-burdening bureaucracy too heavy for society to carry
- **Synergistic impacts** - several factors combine to bring about a downfall.

What is modern civilisation and why is it different?

Here we take the term 'modern civilisation' to include all the ways in which peoples around the world are connected globally, and participate in the global institutions, economy, communication, knowledge sharing, technology, travel, as well as share global common resources such as oceans. Of course, the world today comprises many sovereign states, different societies and cultures, and considerable diversity in power, wealth, stage of economic development, languages, political regimes, belief systems, and history but all are increasingly connected and interlinked to global phenomena. Hence the main difference between civilisation today and those in the past is that modern society operates globally.

Threats and opportunities for modern civilisation

Today there are several existential threats that did not face past civilisations: in terms of our highest to lowest estimated risk they are: global nuclear warfare; Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI); dangerous or abrupt climate change; global pandemics; and biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse. In addition to ASI, we are experiencing an exponential advancement of other disruptive frontier technologies enabling change, synthesis and design of life at the molecular and genetic levels; prolonging human life span; merger of humans and machines; building humanoid robots that will populate the planet; and leaving the Earth to colonise space and other celestial bodies.

What is also different today than for past civilisations is that we know and understand many of the threats to modern civilisation, and, by and large, we know the solutions. We are more scientifically and technically advanced; we can support a vast human population of 8.2 billion and growing; we have more social and economic resilience; and we are more globally connected and capable of responding to challenges.

Is modern civilisation showing the signs of unravelling?

Civilisations typically go through a life cycle – from emergence to growth to maturity to decline. One life cycle proposes eight phases: (1) emergence, (2) stability, (3) early growth, (4) prosperity, (5) overshoot, (6) hubris, (7) totalitarianism, and (8) collapse. Each phase has some defining characteristics. Today we appear to be located somewhere in the phases 5-7, a little shy of phase 8 – collapse.

The fact that past civilisations have gone through life cycles, does not automatically mean the same will happen for modern civilisation. In the analyses in this Insight we have found that there are signs that modern civilisation is both making significant progress in the wellbeing of humans, and at the same time is increasing its risk of unravelling. We simplify this interplay as two opposing megatrends.

One megatrend is that life has and is still getting better for people on average – as indicated by increasing global life expectancy, population and an improving standard of living. Increasing longevity is due to several factors, including decreased child mortality, better health care and hygiene, healthier lifestyles, along with better access to medicines such as antibiotics and vaccines, safer homes, cleaner water, fresher air, less pollution, plentiful and more nutritious food, and, for some at least, more exercise and smarter lifestyle choices. Improved standards of living have resulted from programs that have increased GDP and comprehensive wealth per capita, reduced poverty (especially in China and India), improved services to wider populations, and enabled widespread access to powerful communications technologies and knowledge. Scientific advancements have underpinned many improvements for humanity and supported a massive growth in human population over the last century, whilst improving health and wealth, on average, at the same time.

The opposing megatrend is that modern civilisation is facing growing existential threats including nuclear war, abrupt and dangerous climate change, the rise of AI, deadly pandemics, and ecosystem collapse. Other concerns include growing societal complexity, misinformation and disinformation, societal polarisation and fragmentation, and the recent decline in democracy and rise of autocratic leaders, now including the world's two superpowers (China and US) and two foremost nuclear powers (Russia and US). Climate change is advancing rapidly, and the global response is still far too weak. An estimated million species are at risk as we enter the first human-induced mass extinction event. AI development is out of public control and could comprehensively out-compete human intelligence and displace human jobs in a few decades, or sooner. Inequality and social discontent are a growing issue in some countries. Sovereign and regional strategic competition for power, territory, economic advantage or ideologies can spill over into additional conflicts and wars, which after a long period of post-WWII peace, are on the rise again. Competition between countries can see unbridled arms races and uncontrolled technological advances that may not serve to benefit humanity overall. Global interconnectedness brings a wider level of vulnerability to crises, as exemplified by the fast global transfer of financial crises and pandemics. The Doomsday Clock is at its closest ever to midnight – just 89 seconds away!

The negative megatrend can certainly be considered as a sign that modern civilisation is unravelling but this would only become a reality if global cohesion, supported by the positive megatrend, is diminished. That said, a key point is that any one of the existential threats can undo all the good works leading to a more positive future. Several threats in concert amount to an even greater risk of societal collapse.

Disquieting lack of response

Perhaps the greatest dilemma is that we know how to respond to the negative megatrend and its rising threat, but we seem incapable of responding adequately.

Unlike earlier civilisations, we can both learn from the past and action the vast amount of today's knowledge, amassed through science and practice, towards a positive future. We know that many problems facing society today can be remedied, sometimes easily: for example greenhouse gas emissions can be reduced; wealth can be more evenly redistributed and inequalities diminished; development can be made more sustainable; ecological destruction can be halted and reversed; pollution can be cleaned up; risk of pandemics can be limited and responses improved; disasters can be planned for and recovery quickened; poverty can be eliminated; and potentially dangerous technologies can be regulated. Such steps, if implemented, would substantially lessen the chance of a future societal collapse.

So why don't we take up the challenge adequately? Many thinkers have addressed this problem, in growing numbers since the 1960s. Some ideas include: (i) humans respond to clear and present dangers more than future, distant or abstract ones; (ii) people naturally dislike change even when needed; (iii) humans tend to focus on the short term and value immediate benefits over long-term outcomes; (iv) people think linearly and fail to comprehend non-linear or exponential change; (v) everyone has a different worldview, a different interpretation of reality – a problem when a unified response is needed; (vi) risks are often seen as someone else's problem or to be dealt with by somebody else; (vii) the elites may see their current or future status under threat if the necessary changes were made, and will use means at their disposal to protect their interests.

We can appeal to science for answers – indeed science has provided solutions to today's challenges. But there are at least four reasons that scientific solutions aren't always employed: (1) there has been an erosion of trust in science in the 'post-truth' world, largely as the result of well-funded mis-information campaigns; (2) science is often the cause of existential risks – for example the atom bomb and coming ASI; (3) scientists are often seen to compete amongst themselves – although often part of the scientific process this is difficult to understand for the wider public; (4) very few members of the public and very few politicians are trained in science, and so believing scientific results or arguments becomes a matter of trust and faith that competes with their own beliefs and worldviews.

Research shows that societies confronted with a continuous stream of new problems tend to delay effective responses for a variety of reasons: (i) problems may remain undetected for some time, especially if they are unlike those previously experienced; (ii) even if a problem is recognised by experts, the time lag before society in general recognises that something should be done can be long because change of opinion is often slow; (iii) delays will be particularly pronounced for complex problems and in societies that have strong social control; (iv) an opinion shift may be inhibited by deliberate downplaying of the problem by a credible authority; (v) delays may be caused by competition for attention by simultaneously occurring problems; (vi) even if a problem is generally recognised, the last phase of delay tends to be longer if a central decision-making authority is lacking, and if disproportionately powerful stakeholders that benefit from the status quo are involved.

Archaeological evidence over thousands of years examining how past societies have approached adversity also suggests that rigid, top-down approaches to complex problems have been a doomed strategy throughout human history. Instead, solutions to our most complex challenges begin and end with cooperation and varied, well-functioning institutions, according to anthropologists.

"Archaeological evidence over thousands of years examining how past societies have approached adversity also suggests that rigid, top-down approaches to complex problems have been a doomed strategy throughout human history."

In summary

We conclude that, in the most general terms, some things are getting better for humanity and some worse, but, overall, the risk of modern civilisation collapsing is increasing, following the path of many previous civilisations. Whilst the optimistic might be persuaded by the ongoing impressive array of human achievements, the problem is that all the good can be quickly undone by just one of today's existential risks fully materialising. The great dilemma is that we know full well how to manage and reduce these risks, but we seem incapable of learning from past civilisations whilst at the same time lacking the collective will to make the necessary changes at sufficient scale and speed to respond to current challenges. The required effort is seemingly being hampered by numerous intrinsic human limitations but also by vested interests who seek to maintain the status quo for personal gain. Whilst there are many positives about humanity's progress, and some causes for optimism, the extant and emerging risks need the collective attention of all society, or at least enough co-operation, if we are to survive and prosper.

About GFR Insights

GFR Insights sets out to provide current scientific information on some of the big questions of our time. The information shared has been compiled using relevant journal articles and other credible sources, as well as the Author's own knowledge and expertise. Insights publications are not generally peer-reviewed. The thoughts published are entirely the Author's and the Author takes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. Readers are encouraged to undertake their own independent research through other sources to validate the claims contained herein. The information published in this series has been gathered from a multitude of sources believed to be both credible and current as at the time of publishing. Thoughts and feedback from readers are welcome, please email nick@globalfutureresearch.com.

This GFR Update was authored by Prof Nick Schofield with editing and design by Patricia Dalby.
Copyright © 2025 by Global Future Research. Information and excerpts from this publication may be cited by referencing: *© Global Future Research (2025) Insight 9: Collapse: Is human civilisation unravelling? Summary.*