

Sovereignty in the 21st Century

and the Crisis for Identity, Cultures, Nation-States, and Civilisations

By Gregory R. Copley

US President Donald Trump, in his second address to the United Nations General Assembly on September 25, 2018, made a strenuous case for the doctrine and concept of sovereignty, not just of the US but also as a right for all nation-states.

It is highly significant that few people today even comprehend the concept of sovereignty. The confused media coverage of Trump's speech reflected that reality, because sovereignty and nationalism had been erased from our lexicon of the past seven decades. So, too, has our understanding of even the meaning of the basic terms of "democracy", "nationalism", "republicanism", and "monarchy". Pres. Trump's reiteration of the US case was an indication of the global momentum toward sovereignty and against the 70-year or more tide we have witnessed of the erosion of the sovereign rights and duties of nation-states.

There was, in this, a vital message for Australia.

So what is sovereignty?

Sovereignty is a value, a quality. It fluctuates and is relative. It describes the place of the nation-state and the individual in their broader context. The identity and prestige which societies and individuals achieve determines the degree of their sovereignty, and therefore how well they can control their survival and wellbeing.

It is, and must be, a never-ending quest, for loss of sovereignty is loss of self.

Dr Stefan Possony, who has been described as the "greatest strategic philosopher of the 20th Century", said: "Prestige is the credit rating of nations." And sovereignty is prestige incarnate; prestige made flesh and blood.

Sovereignty is a framework which is rooted in the emotions and psychology of societies, both the holders of it and those who acknowledge it, and yet it has direct, tangible outcomes.

We vitiate our sovereignty when, as a society, we defer to another within an alliance or confederation or to an opponent. We diminish it when we allow our currency and economy to become dependent on the currency or economy of another. Sovereignty is always qualified to some degree, even for the mightiest of nations or individuals.

Donald J. Trump, the 45th President of the United States, invoked the word “sovereignty” 19 times in his inaugural speech to the United Nations General Assembly on September 19, 2017. His theme was the reclamation of US sovereignty. Donald Trump’s predecessor, Pres. Barack Obama, the 44th President, in *his* final speech to the UN General Assembly on September 20, 2016, devoted the entirety of his talk, in contradistinction, to stressing the need for globalism, and for a repudiation of sovereignty.

Nothing could have contrasted the fundamental difference between those successive US leaders more profoundly, nor the different ages they represented. Yet the importance of these stark, mutually hostile views of where the US and the world should – or will – travel went unremarked by the urban media.

When I say that these diverging views represented different ages, it is important to note that the revival and assertion of the need for sovereignty is very much the *new* age; the age of our immediate future. The age of globalism — anti-sovereignty — is the age of our immediate past. Whether we like it or not.

That is not to say that the age of globalism will not come again; it will. All patterns of human social behavior are cyclical. But right now, we are moving to an age which demands a reinforcement of sovereignty by most societies. This is because a reversion to social identity — based around history and geography — is a normal reaction to chaos, uncertainty, and threat.

We are in a world in which populations are transforming in numbers, nature, movement, and condition. Nothing could be more challenging to societies and

to individuals than this. So understanding the new strategic context enables us to respond appropriately. And this context is beginning to sweep over us like a *tsunami*, particularly with regard to the size, movement, and condition of human numbers.

Later historians may review this period as the crumbling and subsequent collapse of “Western civilisation”, although we’re not entirely sure what truly defines Western civilisation. We are certainly witnessing, at least, a transformation of what we have known: a cratometamorphosis, a reorganization of entire societies.

We have seen it before, from the end of the “globalized” world in the 12th Century BC, when almost all of the great nations of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East from Egypt up to Persia and the Hittite empire in what is now Turkey, along with the kingdoms of Mycenae, Canaan, Cyprus (then known as Alashiya), Babylonia, and so on, suddenly collapsed or contracted, seemingly without warning. Even the names of many of the kingdoms and civilisations of that era have been obliterated from our current knowledge.

We saw in a following era the later collapse of the Hellenic city-states with their absorption into the Alexandrian Greek civilisation and then *its* collapse or retrenchment within a couple of generations, by 323 BC, with the death of Alexander the Great. We saw it with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the late Fifth Century. And with the collapse in the 13th Century of the great Mongol Eurasian empires which Genghis Khan begat. And with the collapse of the Indus Valley civilisations, the Mayans, Incas, and so on, in various ages of human societies.

There are variations to the theme. There are recognizable patterns as to how civilisational collapse occurs, and how human societies subsequently re-group. I started to describe the process of transformation first in 2012 in a book called *UnCivilization: Urban Geopolitics in a Time of Chaos*, and more in a new book with the title of our talk today: *Sovereignty in the 21st Century and the Crisis for Identity, Cultures, Nation-States, and Civilizations*. Essentially, civilisations have predictable life-cycles, like all living organisms. Cultures may endure

and mutate indefinitely, but civilisations are just collections of individual human organisms who cannot live except in organized bodies. We are the particles of the greater entity, an entity which has a predictable path of evolutionary development to include maturity and a sclerotic descent into inefficiency; ultimately to vulnerability and death.

Civilisations last on average around 250 years, although history shows that they can be revitalized and their lives revived. The Roman Republic's collapse was re-born as the Roman Empire and it grew again to full term.

Cultures survive within our DNA; instincts toward collective action remain as part of our fundamental requirement to survive and reproduce. Societies, like all organic matter, transform, burying and protecting their historical tendencies deeper and deeper within their core, as if storing them for a bleak winter.

And we are certainly now in the process of transforming rapidly. Some of this transformation involves the eruption within societies of those historical allegiances we had long thought buried by events. This is a pattern of humanity.

We need to see the larger and longer-term patterns to truly comprehend the short-term challenges. To fail to understand the broader context would mean that we are left merely to react to events which we have not foreseen. Reaction is not leadership. Reaction is tactical. Leadership, on the other hand, always comprehends context. Action in the knowledge of context is the function of leadership, and can lead to success. Reaction is either the losing hand, or merely the hand of compensatory management. Leadership, significantly, is about the initiation of disruption or disruptive patterns. Management is about process. And process is usually about the management of decline.

So whence have we come, and where are we now marching?

The last industrial revolution led us through a 20th Century of great upheaval of violence and technological progress in its first half; on to unprecedented wealth, health, and growth in the second half. It was the incredible momentum of technological, scientific, and supply-chain development which saw the Allied victory of World War II transform the world. It also saw the start of a global scat-

tering of human societies from a relatively controlled population spread until that time.

We saw human numbers grow from about 2.5-billion in 1950 to 7.5-billion today with a concurrent growth in *per capita* wealth, more evenly spread than ever before. We saw a concurrent growth in average human caloric intake, accompanying and supporting major improvements in healthcare, and therefore in human longevity and improved live birth rates. We saw a 70-year period of growth in literally everything, transforming our economic models to become entirely dependent on constantly increasing scale. They became increasingly dependent on abstract currency formats, such as credit in its multiplicity of variations, to fund our growth.

Human population growth was good for, if nothing else, the creation of constantly expanding markets. The most valuable service a human could perform in such circumstances, apart from reproducing, was merely to consume.

Well, we kept consuming, but we have actually failed to keep reproducing.

The baby boom generation has not replaced itself, and it is now disappearing. The human population growth trend is, in many parts of the world, collapsing for the time being. In a few areas — Africa and India — the growth rate is reaching apogee before they, too, go into population decline. So this massive transformation from a world of growing human numbers to one of declining human numbers will totally change our economic models. For the time being, the population reversal is disguised and confused by the continued urbanization of rural peoples and by the rise of transnational migration, legal and illegal, as old borders crumble.

The combination of wealth and urbanisation has played a crucial rôle in ending the population rise. Apart from the reality that urban societies naturally reduce their reproduction rates — whether in the industrialised world or in India or Africa — they also create new forms of medical problems because of sedentary lifestyles. A report published on January 18, 2017, by *Clinical Diabetes and Endocrinology* carried a report entitled “Diabetes and its drivers: the largest epidemic in human history?”. The author, Paul Z. Zimmet, said that he felt that

Type 2 diabetes was already a much bigger epidemic than the Black Death, which killed as much as 20 percent of the global population in the 14th Century. In fact, it probably killed more than half the Eurasian population. Diabetes has become a pandemic; 151-million people suffered from it in 2000; now it's close to a half-billion, with another 380-million at risk of imminent contraction.

This is just one of the urban-centric diseases which have accompanied global urbanization. Today, more than 54 percent of people are urbanized. And some 90 percent of the Australian population is urbanized.

Apart from acting as an accelerant to population decline caused by the lower fertility of the Baby Boom generation, these healthcare issues are beginning to erode life-expectancy. All of this is transforming our economic framework, but particularly the lower demand for property which will emerge over the coming decades.

We will be forced to face new ways of making our societies viable, and find new ways to think about security, apart from the normal transformation of the global strategic architecture due to the post-maturity nature of Western civilization. Waves of natural and manmade factors also impacted the then-“civilized” world of the early 12th Century BC, and economic drivers were a factor in both the power and the precariousness of societies at that time.

Today, one of the factors we must consider is the decline in the discovery or creation of new disruptive technologies over the past decade or so. This will worsen as economic pressures compound. For now, there's a pick-up in the US economy and in some aspects of US R&D funding, but many other major economies in Europe, the PRC, Japan, and Australasia, are essentially flat. We began some years ago drifting toward a decline in pure scientific research and more toward research which merely exploited earlier breakthroughs. This was definitely a sign that the great Cold War growth would not be sustained for long.

The signs of change are all around, as they were with the collapse of the globalized world 3,200 years ago, but no-one pays attention to them. Archaeologists continue to unearth the clay tablets of correspondence from right up to the very

days before the great capitals collapsed in the 12th Century BC, in which merchants and leaders alike failed to comprehend their imminent demise. In our own lives, we have witnessed three decades of transformation since the end of the Cold War during which the signs of the transformation of the global strategic architecture were evident. Most of us have failed to comprehend the passing of an entire age.

I said in the 1990s that nation-states which reverted rapidly and unflinchingly to their nationalism would be best prepared to weather change.

We have seen the past three decades in which the entire West has spent its so-called “peace dividend” on self-indulgence while only a few major states actually focused on sovereignty and their national interests: the People’s Republic of China (the PRC), and the Russian Federation. Both recognized that, at the end of “traditional communism”, they needed to re-group around national identity. Their peoples rushed toward it.

The rest of the world has begun to follow suit. The nationalist voting patterns in the United Kingdom, with Brexit; in Austria, Hungary, and Italy; the secessionism around Catalan identity in Spain; the Trump revolution in the US; and the revival of the great historical identities of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Iran, are evidence of where the world is moving. Even those with fairly recent identity, such as Turkey and Croatia, have invented a mythical national identity around which to rally.

Those who persist in open borders and the power of today’s mega-city states will see the shadow of Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great, sweeping away the city states of Hellas; and the shadow of Duke Valentino, Cesare Borgia, Machiavelli’s *Prince*, sweep away the city states of the Italian peninsula.

The global strategic architecture began to change, as we knew it must, with the end of the Cold War in 1990. That change is gaining momentum, but there is no inevitability as to its specific direction. The growth of the People’s Republic of China as a global strategic power is gathering pace, but there is no inevitability that it will reach the goal which its present leadership wishes for it. The PRC is

facing its own population disruption, not only because of the end of its own Baby Boom generation, but because of its urban-related diseases — particularly diabetes — which are statistically much higher than in Western industrial countries. And because of China's endemic shortage of water — especially to meet the heightened demands of urban societies — and because of the pollution of its agricultural land, making food importation a massive narcotic dependency.

Similarly, to believe in the linear decline of the US as a strategic power is to ignore history. Nothing is linear. But the patterns of societal cycles are as familiar as the patterns of individual life-cycles. Within these individual and collective lifecycles we retain a panoply of options.

Our operating context is in a state of perpetual movement. And if our context changes, then so, too, should our policies. Political realities, economic frameworks (even currencies), social gathering patterns, and technologies are all in the process of change, so why should we expect our policies to remain unchanged?

We saw the past century driving most societies further toward collective behavior, with an increasing erosion, particularly in the past 70 or so years, of the concept of national sovereignty. Supranational entities of collective authority grew ever larger, but this concept began to peak at the same time that global population growth also began to reach apogee in its growth curve. In other words, in the past decade.

Those nation-states which have retained cohesion and authority have done so by the conscious reversion to strong national identity and an authoritarianism which spells the end of a century or so in which the world has experimented with its present approach to “democracy”, expressed solely as a formal ballot-box framework. We have witnessed democracy degrade as a concept into a transactional, materialistic, short-term bargain between electors and elected.

The same century also saw the world move beyond the Age of Reason and Science — the Enlightenment — back to a world which is fundamentally belief-driven. This, of course, reinforces ignorance, given that entrenched beliefs are

among the greatest inhibitors of innovative thinking. We forget that belief is not knowledge. Still less, necessarily, is it wisdom. But it is no accident that human society goes through these cycles dominated by either fact-based or belief-based functioning.

Yet it is human belief patterns which tend to be what save societies. Fear of the unknown creates political correctness, which is the human mechanism by which we circle the wagons, keeping threats at bay. Beliefs keep us together, keep us optimistic, or fearful when we need to be, and help perpetuate the imperative to reproduce. Beliefs tend to offset the nihilism of a total reliance on science.

Human progress is always hallmarked by a fine partnership of beliefs — which include the foundations of identity security and self-confidence — with practical, scientific capabilities. This is the delicately-balanced tension between belief and knowledge. Right now, as economic and political uncertainty accelerate, we find that knowledge declines as a proportion of our decisionmaking matrix. The future is uncertain, so we call on the past for guidance. And we do this, for the most part, unconsciously. We fall back on beliefs. Some of those beliefs are of recent inculcation; some are deeply rooted in our language, our sense of identity, and our mythology. We draw upon epic sagas which reaffirm our right to survival, and our historical ability to dominate our environment.

We see now, as the global architecture of the 20th Century disappears, the historically rooted belief of most Chinese people — regardless of their cultural origins among the Han or the Manchu, or Mongol or the Turkic peoples — that they must seize their opportunity anew to revive not only their glory but their ability to determine their own fate. This is not the Communist Party of China talking; the communist leadership is merely riding this wave and this opportunity.

We saw, since the collapse in April this year of the communist-based Ethiopian Government, the massive momentum to regain their sense of historical identity and special place in history of Ethiopian peoples from more than 60 ethnic groups. This represents a dramatic reversal of four decades of attempts to eradicate in the Ethiopian peoples all sense of their three millennia of unique identi-

ty. The surge of Ethiopian identity is currently transforming the strategic destiny of the entire Red Sea and Horn of Africa situation, therefore impacting one of the most important trade routes in the world.

We have also seen the transformation of Egypt back to its sense of great historical identity, preceding the recent 1,400 years as an Arab-conquered nation; before its Sassanid age; before its Byzantine age, to its various pharaonic identities even before the Alexandrian Ptolemaic pharaohs. It is not surprising that this resurgence of identity-consciousness occurred — and motivated the population — at a time of great threat and hardship.

This reversion to deep, often mythical, historical identity is occurring, too, in Europe as the promise of the European Union has given way to the economic hardships and loss of identity which resulted after the European promise peaked. We have seen the reversion to what the media is calling “nationalism” throughout much of Europe in the wake not only of the economic difficulties of the EU, but also the post-Cold War decline of global dominance by the US-led West, the rise of the challenge by the PRC, the uncertainties as to the economic future of the dollar and the euro, and the contraction of the US itself from engagement in Europe.

You can be sure that in many areas around the world this flight to deeply-ingrained social identity will lead to an increasing identification with traditional forms of social hierarchy. Monarchies, where they have an historical root in societies, will once again flourish.

As economic and currency uncertainties rise, so do individual traders move to hedge their dependencies on currencies and credit systems which had, for a time, seemed limitless. Moving from trust in the US dollar to trust in the PRC’s *renminbi* is a difficult leap. But we have to bear in mind that the dollar itself only gained dominance during the past half-century or more, when the pound sterling resiled from its global dominance and was replaced by a “basket of currencies” on which trade was negotiated, and then by the dollar.

All dogs and dollars have their day, but we may not yet be ready for dependence totally on the *renminbi*. In such a world, in which the universality of a

currency cannot for now be guaranteed, trading nations immediately begin reverting to bilateral trading balances. We tend to revert to trade which is based on binary partnerships, often reduced in essence to barter trade. So a reversion to “national” interests is not only natural, but inevitable, during such a period as we are now entering.

And if we are forced to look to our national assets, and therefore to defend them more directly than in our very recent and very, very brief, fragile period of a so-called “rules based global order”, then what we are looking at is the resurrection of our understanding of sovereignty.

Sovereignty and identity are natural partners. They naturally assume primacy in times of stress or threat. Those still dreaming of the immediate past — the golden half century we enjoyed with the growth in everything, but most of all in hubris — decry what they call the rise of “populism” and “nationalism”, but these phenomena are the natural response to cyclical transformations in the global economic and strategic architecture. We forget that all politics is “populist”. No politician can get honestly elected without appeal to the lowest common denominator in the electorate.

The present cyclical reversion to national interests, most dramatically evidenced in the PRC and Russia, is a process which begins to overturn the century we have seen of democracy expressed through a rigid ballot box process. What we think of democracy today is not what we thought of it 50 years ago, or a century ago. Democracy itself is expressed in fashions which themselves are cyclical. Some of the patterns of democracy used today were evidenced in the Hellenic city-states of the Iron Age, and even then Plato said that such forms of democracy would rapidly evolve into ochlocracy — mob rule — as they have done even in the past century.

The essence of democracy is not its expression through a ballot box choice, but rather the innate sense of self-reliance and self-assertion of an individual’s control over his own fate. Individual sovereignty is how each of us forms a contract with a larger society. It is, as Rousseau expressed it, the “social contract” which is most fluidly represented between governed and governor. Most of this con-

tract is implicit in the human need for cooperation in order to survive and reproduce; it is also implicit in the bond between governed and governor. It is the agreement to assign rôles to members of society in order to make the society function viably.

What we are now seeing is a reversion in many areas of the world to that implicit sense of the assertion by individuals and societies of the defense of their own survival. So we are now re-evaluating things, such as the basic frameworks of social governance we had taken for granted over the recent century or two.

Now we carry ourselves into our future. We carry all the lessons and experiences of our ancestors, from whom we cannot escape and who define us, and give us comfort of familiarity and purpose as we move along new paths. We are all sovereign, and we determine by our actions the degree of sovereign control we can ensure for our society so that it may in turn give us protection and perpetuation.

It is a rare moment in history that we can be so conscious of the power of sovereignty. It is a moment of great possibilities.