



Time to Address the Grim State of Nuclear Affairs



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On January 28, 2025, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* announced the new time for the Doomsday Clock. It set the time at 89 seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been to this hour. According to the Science and Security Board of the *Bulletin* — whose primary task is to decide the time on the Clock— dangerously negative trends continued on all the four issues considered in the time setting process. These include nuclear weapons, climate change, potential misuse of biological science and disruptive technologies like artificial intelligence. Given this, the statement released on the occasion read, “In 2024, humanity edged ever closer to catastrophe.” The time was moved from 90 seconds to 89 seconds, bringing it closer to midnight.

One second may be a small change. But it is a hugely significant move underscoring the gravity of the situation. Given that the world was already precariously placed so close to midnight over the last two years, even the slightest move further is a step closer to the edge of the precipice. It is a warning and an urgent call for action. Since the Clock takes man-made threats that can become existential risks for humanity into account, it also holds out hope that humankind can take steps to mitigate them.

While negative trend lines mark each of the four dimensions that determine the time on the Clock, the nuclear landscape is particularly concerning at the moment. All of the major nuclear-armed states are engaged in modernising and expanding their nuclear arsenals and capabilities. Each claims the need to do so to ostensibly ‘restore stability’ that has been disturbed by the other’s actions. Without meaningful dialogues addressing their threat perceptions, an arms race is unfolding before our eyes. Meanwhile, nuclear brinkmanship has become fashionable and acceptable as normal behaviour. Therefore, doctrines that lower thresholds of use of nuclear weapons, postures that flaunt dual-use capabilities, and strategies that are built around the idea of limited nuclear use no longer raise eyebrows.

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Arms control is on the verge of becoming a vestige of the past as no negotiations are underway to extend the last existing bilateral arms control treaty between the United States and Russia. The New START treaty will expire in 2026 as an unsung hero since both sides have suspended compliance with the treaty against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The period has also been marked by an increase in the salience of nuclear weapons as non-nuclear weapon states contemplate the relevance of nuclear weapons for national security. Any actions of President Trump that sow disquiet amongst US allies would have further implications. Meanwhile, long-standing concerns over the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programmes persist.

It is to draw attention to this state of nuclear affairs and to prompt leaders to take responsible steps away from such risks that the time on the Doomsday Clock was changed. As a graphic representation of the times we live in, it exhorts political, military, technology, and business leaders to recognise the serious issues with the seriousness and maturity they deserve.

A similar message for action was sent out on December 10, 2024, when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Nihon Hidankyo — a group of organisations representing survivors of the August 1945 nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The award honoured the *hibakusha* who have spent their lives recounting their experience of the atomic bombings and its lasting impact. Usually, for a wound to heal, doctors advise not scratching off the scabs. But the *hibakusha* have spent their lives keeping their wounds fresh to ensure that the horror of nuclear weapons could be made known to others. The Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Nihon Hidankyo was a recognition of their efforts and a wake-up call to humanity that nuclear dangers are grave and growing.

President Trump's mention of the need for denuclearisation because nuclear weapons are expensive and dangerous during his address to the Davos Summit showed a slim sliver of hope. It evoked a somewhat encouraging response from the Russian President, who echoed his own desire to do everything possible to avert a third world war. But even before one could view these statements with cautious optimism, Trump's executive order, which focuses on building a next-generation missile defence system, can only fuel the ongoing offence defence spiral and arms racing.

Given that the US is traditionally the trendsetter on the nuclear fashion street, it is hoped that President Trump will show maturity and a desire for a legacy that could emerge from a bold leadership. As the Doomsday Clock and the Nobel Peace Prize have signalled, that is the crying need of the hour. Will he and leaders of the other major nuclear weapon states dare to look at the mirrors held up to them?

This 80th year of the anniversary of the atomic bombings could best be marked by a new, high-level initiative that single-mindedly seeks to reduce the risks that currently have us teetering at the brink.

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