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Humanity Is One Minute from Midnight

Mar 16, 2022 | EL HASSAN BIN TALAL, SUNDEEP WASLEKAR

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it may be necessary to move the Doomsday Clock forward to just one minute to midnight. The world needs a new global security architecture to constrain nuclear weapons, hypersonic missiles, killer pathogens, and the mounting military capability of artificial intelligence.

AMMAN – Every year since 1947, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists – founded by Albert Einstein and scientists from the Manhattan Project who helped develop the atomic weapons used at Hiroshima and Nagasaki – has set the Doomsday Clock. The clock uses “the imagery of apocalypse (midnight) and the contemporary idiom of nuclear explosion (countdown to zero)” to indicate humanity’s vulnerability to man-made disasters. In January 2022, the Bulletin’s Science and Security Board set the clock for the third consecutive year at **100 seconds to midnight**, marking the closest humanity has come to extinction in the last 75 years.

Barely a month after that gloomy prognosis, Russia launched a wide-ranging “special military operation” against Ukraine. Worse still, Russian President Vladimir Putin shortly afterward **ordered** Russia’s nuclear forces to be put on high alert, and **threatened** to use this arsenal should the West attempt to intervene militarily in Ukraine.

Given such incendiary rhetoric, the apparent erosion of collective mechanisms to manage conflict and global security risks, and the fact that nine countries possess a total of **13,100 nuclear weapons**, it may now be necessary to reset the Doomsday Clock once again. This time, it should move forward to just one minute to midnight.

Thucydides, the Greek historian and philosopher, **warned** of how the dreadful collapse of humane values under the pressure of war could push humans to exalt “vengeance above innocence and profit above justice.” These are malicious values, and yet powers around the world are increasingly promoting them. In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, even relatively pacifist countries have started to rearm.

Instead of withdrawing from the precipice, the world seems to be hastening toward it. After years of geopolitical rifts, civil wars, and human catastrophes, we appear to have arrived at a point where leaders can brandish the nuclear threat in the most cavalier fashion.

Amid the incalculable suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the world’s great powers remained more focused on their military capabilities than on human welfare. Russia, for example, threatened to use newly tested **hypersonic missiles** that can travel at more than 15 times the speed of sound, autonomously determine their trajectories, and deliver nuclear payloads undetected by radar.

The use of such weapons would undoubtedly trigger immediate retaliation, destroying much of the planet within hours. Anything surviving would soon be killed by radiation, a severe nuclear winter, and ecosystem collapse. More generally, the myriad flashpoints and conflicts around the world have pushed countries toward a nuclear tipping point, triggering a “**proliferation epidemic**” instead of constructive dialogue.

To reverse this grim trend, we need a new global security architecture to constrain nuclear weapons, hypersonic missiles, killer pathogens, and the mounting military capability of automated weapons powered by artificial intelligence. Quite simply, the world needs to construct a new “world order” that safeguards humanity.

Whether the issue is climate change or nuclear weapons, we need a global governance grid capable of addressing existential problems that nation-states alone cannot tackle. A fundamental component of such an arrangement must be the elimination of nuclear, biological, chemical, and autonomous lethal weapons. New conflict-prevention and resolution mechanisms, particularly to address disputes between leading political, economic, and military powers, are needed to advocate for mutual assured survival instead of mutual assured destruction.

In January 2022, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States **reiterated** the 1985 **statement** by then-US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader **Mikhail Gorbachev** that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” Leaders know that no country will be spared the grave toll of such a war. We therefore appeal to the international community to facilitate negotiations for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine and take steps to build a sustainable architecture for peace.

As the hands of the Doomsday Clock approach midnight, the choice facing the world is clear. It is more critical than ever, as Einstein and the philosopher Bertrand Russell **noted**, for everyone to “remember your humanity, and forget the rest.”

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