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MAYDAY, MAYDAY: IT'S 85 SECONDS TO MIDNIGHT

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The message from the new time on the Doomsday Clock — 85 seconds to midnight — is loud and clear. After a careful analysis of the risks related to climate change, nuclear and biological developments, and emerging disruptive technologies that continue to go unaddressed, the 15 members of the Science and Security Board, who hail from diverse backgrounds and nationalities, felt the need to take a giant leap by reducing four seconds from the symbolic clock. It is meant to send a strong note to global leaders and the public: It's time to wake up and smell the coffee.

The Doomsday Clock has been maintained by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists since 1947 and has come to be recognized as an indicator of the global state of existential risk. The minute hand on the clock is illustrative of the human-created dangers that humanity faces. A little over a decade ago, in 2015, the clock stood at three minutes to midnight. In 2017 the hand was moved up by 30 seconds, in 2018 by another 30 seconds and in 2020 by 20 more seconds. So at the start of this decade, the world stood at 100 seconds to midnight, the closest humanity had ever been to Armageddon.

But worse was yet to come. Five years later, the world has inched 15 seconds closer. Ironically, the need to move the time sharply forward was felt in 2025, the year the world commemorated the 80th anniversary of the atomic bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the 55th year of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Instead of the norms of nuclear non-use and nonproliferation cementing over time, they seemed most insecure in 2025.

Of course, negative trend lines have been visible for some years across the four areas that factor into deciding the time. But 2025 was particularly disconcerting for the nuclear field, as the sense of risk felt higher than ever before. Multiple nuclear nations remained engaged in building, buttressing, expanding or modernizing their nuclear arsenals; many

did not shy away from brandishing these as part of brinkmanship strategies, including through their liberal use for coercion.

Nuclear armed nations engaged in direct conventional conflicts using new technologies and testing new redlines; nuclear facilities in combat zones were targeted; insecurities amongst the non-nuclear weapon states led some to vocally consider the option of nuclear hedging.

Moreover, the era of bilateral arms control between the U.S. and Russia ended; no new guardrails on numbers, capabilities or deployments were considered; new "invincible weapons," such as underwater nuclear armed drones and nuclear propelled cruise missiles for nuclear delivery were tested; and the use of military force between states resurfaced.

The situation was exacerbated by a lack of willingness of any leader to step up to stem the negative nuclear tide. Rather, nationalist and autocratic inclinations created trust deficits while increasing polarization of the world order. Is it surprising then that we are at 85 seconds to midnight?

As 2026 proceeds, opportunities to turn things around will have to be seized or created. One chance will present itself when the NPT Review Conference brings together 192 nations in April and May. While expectations are low, given the fractious atmosphere and divisive issues, a couple of positive moves could turn the mood around.

The simplest and easiest step would be an announcement by Washington and Moscow to retain the ceilings set by the New START treaty even after its expiration, and follow-up dialogue on strategic stability. Another could be the initiation of a conversation on nuclear issues between the U.S. and China, or one that includes Russia, to discuss, understand and address each other's threat perceptions. Yet another possibility could be the acceptance of a bilateral no-first-use agreement between China and India.

Yes, the current geopolitical environment strains the ability to envision such moves. But that is because the nations naively believe that their nuclear weapons are guarantors of their security without realizing that the race to continue developing them, or threaten their use, actually guarantees their own annihilation too. Things can only turn around when the current crop of leaders see remedial actions not as favors to others but as steps taken in the interest of their nations and peoples.

The setting of the Doomsday Clock is one way of starting the conversation on these existential issues. It seeks to seize the attention of the leaders caught in peevish domestic and international politics and prompt them into taking leadership of matters that are too dangerous to be left adrift. It also hopes to shake citizens out of their complacency so they can apply pressure from below and demand action. The bottom line is that the nuclear status quo, fraught with numerous risks, is unacceptable.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

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ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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