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Opinion

The Doomsday Clock is ticking. Between Trump and Iran, how close is the world coming to nuclear war?



- In the best-case scenario, Trump will be voted out of office this year. In the worst case, Trump's America and eight other nuclear powers might bring the world to the brink of disaster. All it takes, as Iran has shown, is 'human error'

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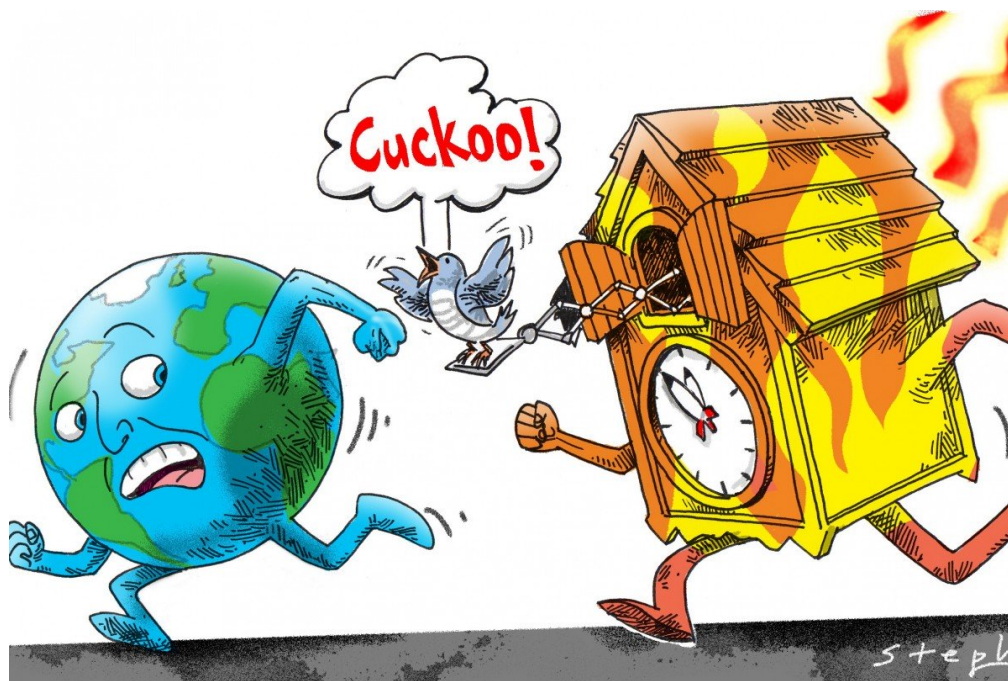


Illustration: Craig Stephens

Without becoming too defensive about America at this rocky passage in its political history (well, it is difficult to defend), I will nonetheless offer something of a defence, since almost no one else wants to try, but maybe someone ought to. So let's start with this: whether the current American president's actions and policies are indefensible is not the point.

At the worst, President Donald Trump is in office for another term but then he's out. Does any other superpower offer such term-limited peace of mind?

Even so, America is not one person any more than China is one person or even one party. To be sure, even if the best comes to pass – a one-term Trump presidency – a lot of bad things could happen in the year ahead. That's why many Americans are not letting up.

Our civil society sector is anything but brain-dead – and is supported politically as well as financially by many Americans who are well aware of our flaws and the limitations of our government no matter what political party or politician is at the top.

The average educated American respects more than one secular or political god. I worship several myself, and next week one of them will step into the spotlight for an annual ritual that reminds us of both the enduring value of our civil society organisations and the kinds of issues they fearlessly take on.

Known as the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, and founded by Manhattan Project scientists in the aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this gold-star non-profit organisation believes we must work dramatically harder to reduce nuclear arsenals curated by arrogant nations that foolishly believe they can have them without thermonuclear accident, much less for intentional usage.

The nine nuclear-armed powers are Britain, China, France, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia and – last but definitely not least – the United States. Any more coming at us? Iran?

The organisation's trademark is the Doomsday Clock, a mock-up of a large wall timepiece set on a display easel. Its dead hands are manually manoeuvred, and about this time every year it is reset, sometimes near or not so very near darkest midnight, to show the world the ever-present potential of nuclear doomsday.

Last January, scientists set the clock at two minutes to midnight; where exactly it will be set this year will be unveiled next week at the ritual in Washington.

The list of VIP attendees will include members of The Elders, a high-minded organisation started by the late Nelson Mandela – including Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland; Jerry Brown, former two-time governor of California; and Ban Ki-moon, former UN secretary general.

And on the science side: Sivan Kartha of the Stockholm Environmental Institute; Robert Rosner, professor in the departments of Astronomy & Astrophysics and Physics at the University of Chicago; and Robert Latiff of the University of Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study – who is also a retired air force major general.

Since its launch in 1947 (when it was set at 11.53pm), the Doomsday Clock has been reset about two dozen times, each recalibration reflecting updated technical input from the organisation's Science and Security Board – and scientists' heartfelt reactions to current world tensions.

To illustrate, after the two nuclear superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union, reached significant arms control agreements, the 1991 clock was set back to a less nervous 17 minutes to midnight. Today, with those nine overconfident nuclear-armed nations ticking on this planet, don't be surprised if the clock's hands wind up nearer the midnight hour.

The fear is not just about the presence of the arsenals or even the insane possibility of their usage but the possibility of technical error or management blunder. Military managers will downplay that idea, as

always. But will they always be right? A nuclear accident cannot happen? Ironically, the validity of this annual event never seems vitiated simply because a nuclear catastrophe has not occurred.

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (thebulletin.org) is not the only non-profit, public interest group to which I contribute an amazingly small amount of money, but it may be the most intellectually robust. Instead of confining its scope to its early fear of nuclear doomsday, the institution has extended its remit to topics such as disruptive technology (artificial intelligence, etc) and climate change.

It insists that precisely because we humans are behind these potential catastrophes, it is our job to take them on with commitment and resolve.

Accordingly, Australia's current nightmare prompts climate scientist Michael Mann to remind the group's members that the country "is literally burning. It needs leadership that is able to recognise that and act. And it needs voters to hold politicians accountable at the ballot box."

Accidents can happen, especially when they are not so much accidents as recurring by-products of human imperfection – negligence, denial of risk, corruption. Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 with 176 human beings on board was tragically blown from the sky by an Iranian surface-to-air missile fired in the belief that there was an incoming enemy.

But surely a colossally larger number of people will die (and future gene pools poisoned), if another "human error" leads to a nuclear tragedy. Will a true reduction in nuclear weapons only be possible after a true disaster? This is what the Atomic Scientists have been trying to tell us all these years.

So watch their Doomsday Clock next week for a sense of the future. Not all Americans are serious people, but for sure the Bulletin's boys and girls are. And they are my America, too.

Tom Plate, distinguished scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University, is the author of *Understanding Doomsday: A Guide for Hawks, Doves and People* (1971), an early effort to explain the nuclear arms race to a general audience