

100 Seconds to Midnight - Memo emailed to UN General Assembly

Written by John Hallam

Monday, 17 February 2020 16:03 -

The below has now been emailed to the UNGA/NPT Revconf, members of the European Parliament, the NZ Parliament, some congresspeople.

It will soon be faxed (yes, faxed) to members of the US Senate and House subcommittees on strategic forces. It will also be emailed to parliamentarians and NGOs in other places.

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MEMO TO UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY/NPT 2020 REVIEW CONFERENCE

Summary of Recommendations

--UNGA/1st cttee should reaffirm that '**A Nuclear War Cannot be Won and Must Never be Fought**'.
Such language should be included in any NPT Outcome document.

--New START should be extended.

--Risk reduction measures including No First Use, De-Alerting, improved or resumed Mil to mil communications, implementation of JDEC, avoidance of provocative military exercises and postures, avoidance of provocative language.

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--Urgent consideration of further arms control measures between the US and Russia, and of ways to widen arms control to include other parties.

--Signature and ratification of the Ban Treaty and movement toward a nuclear weapons convention. Abolition to be seen as a pressing immediate existential priority not a far-off 'feelgood sometime' goal.

A detailed list of measures that would make an (accidental or otherwise) apocalypse less likely is to be found on the website of the Abolition 2000 working group on nuclear risk reduction.

<http://www.abolition2000.org/en/working-groups/nuclear-risk-reduction/>

Dear Delegates, Ministers and Government Representatives,

I write concerning the recent announcement by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists that the hands of the Iconic 'Doomsday Clock' have been moved to an unprecedented 100 seconds to Midnight.

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<https://thebulletin.org/2020/01/watch-the-2020-doomsday-clock-announcement>

<https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/current-time/>

Throughout 2018 and 2019, the Doomsday Clock hands had been at 2 minutes to Midnight, the equal-closest to midnight that they have ever been.

Only in 1953-54, immediately after the US and the USSR tested their first hydrogen bombs, (and with active US planning for pre-emptive nuclear strikes on the USSR) were the hands of the Doomsday Clock as close as even 2 minutes, which has always been regarded as 'closest ever'. Even in the eventful and perilous year of 1983, a year in which the world nearly ended not once but twice, (On September 26th, and over the ensuing November with the Able Archer exercises) – the Doomsday Clock hands were at 3 minutes to midnight. One can argue that with the benefit of hindsight they should have been at least at 2 mins.

What the Bulletin, with its Nobel – heavy board of advisers is now telling us, is that the risk of a (probably but not definitely accidental) nuclear apocalypse is greater now than at any other time including the depths of the cold war.

The Bulletin itself is very much conscious of this, noting that:

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“To say the world is nearer to doomsday today than during the Cold War—when the United States and Soviet Union had tens of thousands more nuclear weapons than they now possess— **is to make a profound assertion that demands serious explanation.** After much deliberation, the members of the Science and Security Board have concluded that the complex technological threats the world faces are at least as dangerous today as they were last year and the year before, when we set the Clock at two minutes to midnight (as close as it had ever been, and the same setting that was announced in 1953, after the United States and the Soviet Union tested their first thermonuclear weapons).”[emphasis mine]

Astonishingly, some commentators have attempted to ridicule and marginalize the clock. This reflects, I think, on the ignorance and prejudice of those who make the comment and not on the clock.

Contrary to what is implied by critics, the clock hands are set after prolonged discussion amongst some of the world's best qualified if not THE best qualified people to form judgements about the likelihood of nuclear war and the severity of climate change. These judgements may not be absolutely perfect and some of them might have been tweaked with hindsight, but they are made soberly and carefully by people who spend their lives thinking about these issues. No better judgement, no more reliable evaluation of the global nuclear security situation, exists.

In this case the clock hands were unveiled by someone who will be very well known to anyone who has spent much time in the UN, namely former UN Secy-General Ban Ki Moon. Extended commentary was given by another figure well known in the UN namely Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and undersecretary-general for human rights. Detailed commentary by members of a board of experts.

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Anyone who watches nuclear weapons matters at all carefully will know what impelled the wise heads who advise on the position of the hands of the Doomsday Clock to place them, soberly and reluctantly, where they have – at the most alarming setting ever.

Obvious factors – observable whether or not you are on the doomsday clocks 'inner circle' – are:

--The once more deteriorating situation with the DPRK

--The continued instability and confrontation between India and Pakistan

--The jettisoning of the INF by the US, and the melting away of the entire existing arms control and risk reduction framework

--The US hostility to New START and to any extension of the New START treaty (a matter requiring merely a signature, and no negotiation whatsoever)

--Russias deployment of exotic new weapon systems that may or may not actually work, but which demonstrate a continued strong commitment to an upgraded nuclear arsenal

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--Occasional 'theological' statements to the effect that if buttons get pushed and billions are incinerated then Orthodox Russians will 'all go to heaven' while Americans 'will just kark it', a mirror-imaging of language often coming from the US Christian right in the 1980s, in which 'the righteous will be raptured to heaven'.

[Putin and the Apocalypse, Jan 24 2019 <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/nuclear-war-putin-orthodox-approval-by-dina-khapaeva-2019-01>

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During the October 2018 Valdai Discussion Club, Putin's rhetoric became even more dramatic. "Russia would be the victim," and "the aggressor should know that revenge is inevitable." While nuclear war would be a

"world catastrophe," he said, at least Russians would "go to heaven," as "martyrs," whereas, lacking any "time to repent," the aggressors

"would just croak." While all of this is tied up with ultranationalist Russian orthodoxy, the parallel with nationalist protestant US christian theologising is striking. Proclaiming that 'the righteous will be raptured to heaven' is no longer a US monopoly.

When apocalyptic theology is translated into actual real world nuclear posture it is likely to become self-fulfilling. Talking about the apocalypse, especially loose talk or talk that seems to accept or welcome it, in the 'right' quarters, may bring that apocalypse closer.

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--A final factor in all of this has been the increasing propensity of NATO and Russia to hold monster military exercises (sometimes at the same time, mirror-imaged across Baltic borders), with nuclear-capable forces. The next batch of such exercises are scheduled for the coming May. The Russians have already remarked that these coming exercises cannot go without a response.

During a set of such exercises some years ago, in which US/NATO and Russian forces, both nuclear-capable, mirror-imaged each others force postures across Baltic state borders, a US general was asked 'what happens if something goes wrong'. 'I don't even want to think about that' he said. Perry, Nunn and Schultz noted in the WSJ that:

“...Since the crises broke out in Ukraine and Syria in the past few years, U.S. and Russian forces have again been operating in proximity, increasing the risk that an act of aggression, followed by an accident or miscalculation, will lead to catastrophe.”

The Bulletin notes that:

“In the nuclear realm, national leaders have ended or undermined several major arms control treaties and negotiations during the last year, creating an environment conducive to a renewed nuclear arms race, to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and to lowered barriers to nuclear war. Political conflicts regarding nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea remain unresolved and are, if anything, worsening. US-Russia cooperation on arms control and disarmament is all but nonexistent.”

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“The world is sleepwalking its way through a newly unstable nuclear landscape. The arms control boundaries that have helped prevent nuclear catastrophe for the last half century are being steadily dismantled.”

“...The demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty became official in 2019, and, as predicted, the United States and Russia have begun a new competition to develop and deploy weapons the treaty had long banned. Meanwhile, the United States continues to suggest that it will not extend New START, the agreement that limits US and Russian deployed strategic nuclear weapons and delivery systems, and that it may withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty, which provides aerial overflights to build confidence and transparency around the world. Russia, meanwhile, continues to support an extension of New START.”

Schultz and Perry had already remarked in April 2019, that:

“The U.S., its allies and Russia are caught in a dangerous policy paralysis that could lead—most likely by mistake or miscalculation—to a military confrontation and potentially the use of nuclear weapons for the first time in nearly 74 years. A bold policy shift is needed to support a strategic re-engagement with Russia and walk back from this perilous precipice. Otherwise, our nations may soon be entrenched in a nuclear standoff more precarious, disorienting and economically costly than the Cold War.”

Retired NATO military chief Stavridis noted in 2019 that:

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"We are in danger of stumbling backward into a Cold War that is to no one's advantage," he said in an email exchange. "Without steady, political-level engagement between the defense establishments, the risk of a true new Cold War rises steadily."

The bottom – line in all of this however, is an increasing carelessness about nuclear weapons, and an increasing willingness to at least contemplate their use – a willingness that finds material expression in the deployment of the latest 'mini' 'tactical' nuclear weapon , the W76-2 – on the USS Tennessee. The deployment of any kind of 'tactical' nuke (of any size) on an SLBM makes no sense whatsoever, and serves to blur the line between 'war-fighting' (which still makes some kind of warped sense), and a spasm of city-destruction.

The recognition that the hands are as close as they now are – the recognition that the risk of an (accidental or otherwise) apocalypse is **AS GREAT AS IT HAS EVER BEEN, EVER,** – surely demands attention and action from the Governments of the world, whether assembled as UNGA (esp First Cttee) or as the 2020 NPT Review Conference.

This placement of the clock hands says business as usual is not an option.

Above all it shows the critical importance of the elimination of nuclear weapons.

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However a large number of less-than-revolutionary, commonsense, even 'boring', immediate-term actions can 'take the apocalypse off the agenda', while paving the way to global zero.

I shall focus on those that make an immediate-term reduction in the likelihood of an apocalypse. Most if not all of them will be familiar to NPT and UNGA delegates, if less familiar to global publics.

(a)The General Assembly and the NPT Rev-con could include (for example in a chairpersons summary), language that:

--Recognizes the unprecedented risk that the clock hands symbolize.

--Reaffirms the Reagan-Gorbachev declaration of 1987-88, that '**A Nuclear War Cannot be Won and must never be Fought**'

(b) NEW START should be renewed and extended. Putin has already many times urged the US to do just that. All that is required is the stroke of a Trumpian pen.

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(c) A series of risk reduction measures should be implemented. These include:

--No First Use

--Lowering of operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems/increased presidential decision-making time.

--Improved or restored mil-to-mil communication

--Implementation of the 1998 (and multiple times reaffirmed) US-Russian agreement to establish a joint data exchange centre (JDEC).

--Avoidance of massive military exercises of a potentially provocative nature especially with nuclear-capable forces and especially where these may be 'mirrored' on the other side of the border. The exercises planned for May should be cancelled.

--Avoidance of language or statements that might cause opposite numbers to assume that the apocalypse is being seriously contemplated and/or prepared for. Statements that in the event of the unthinkable the 'righteous' (Russian orthodox or US protestant) will be 'raptured to heaven', if made by senior policymakers, are decidedly unhelpful, indicating a willingness to countenance universal destruction – omnicide. So are more 'secular' statements or 'warnings' that 'we have powerful nuclear forces', or that this or that action will be met with a 'befitting response'. This kind of language serves merely to up the ante. De-escalation starts first of all with talk, and proceeds to weapons posture.

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This is not an exhaustive list, and these measures do not substitute for the ultimate nuclear safety measure, namely abolition. However some of them may make the difference between civilization abruptly ending, or not ending in the next couple of decades.

What we call 'civilization' is in danger. In its passing, it will take much of the biosphere with it. **The danger is great and immediate and demands action from every UN member state**

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As delegates to the upcoming NPT Review conference and to the General Assembly the responsibility is yours.

John Hallam

Co-Convener, Abolition 2000 Working Group on Nuclear Risk Reduction

People for Nuclear Disarmament

Human Survival Project

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