

A Warning from the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists



The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has set the Doomsday Clock to **85 seconds to midnight**, the closest it has ever been, citing escalating global crises and a widespread failure of leadership. Despite warnings last year, the world's major powers—especially Russia, China, and the

United States—have become more aggressive and nationalistic, eroding international cooperation needed to mitigate existential threats including nuclear war, climate change, biological risks, and unregulated artificial intelligence.

Hopes early in 2025 that nuclear tensions might ease—sparked by US President Donald Trump's attempts to halt the Russia-Ukraine war and propose “denuclearization”—quickly evaporated. Instead, three separate regional conflicts involving nuclear powers risked escalation. The Russia-Ukraine war continued with destabilizing tactics and nuclear threats. India and Pakistan engaged in cross-border drone and missile attacks amid nuclear brinkmanship. Israel and the United States launched strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, raising questions about whether these actions curtailed or intensified Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Meanwhile, a renewed major-power arms race accelerated. China increased its nuclear arsenal, while the United States and Russia continued modernizing their delivery systems. The United States announced “Golden Dome,” an expansive missile defense system incorporating space-based interceptors—likely to escalate military competition in space. As nuclear powers failed to pursue arms control or even basic strategic-stability talks, some US allies began considering their own nuclear programs. The last major US-Russia nuclear limitation treaty, New START, is nearing expiration, threatening to end nearly six decades of nuclear restraint. Reports also suggest the US may resume explosive nuclear testing.

Climate change trends worsened sharply. Atmospheric CO₂ hit record highs, reaching **150% of preindustrial levels**. The year 2024 was the warmest on record, with 2025 close behind. Sea levels reached new highs due to melting glaciers and thermal expansion. Extreme weather intensified: droughts afflicted Peru, the Amazon, and large parts of Africa; Europe suffered another year with over **60,000 heat-related deaths**; massive floods displaced hundreds of thousands in the Congo River Basin and Brazil. Policy responses were inadequate or actively harmful. Recent UN climate summits failed to address fossil fuel phaseout, while the US administration dismantled renewable-energy initiatives and climate policies.

Biological risks also grew. Scientists in late 2024 warned that laboratory-synthesized “mirror life”—cells composed of mirror-image biological molecules—could pose an existential threat if allowed to self-replicate unchecked, potentially

disrupting ecosystems worldwide. No global plan yet exists to regulate such research. AI-assisted biological design raises the risk of engineered pathogens, while weakening norms around biological weapons and degrading public-health infrastructure further increase vulnerability to pandemics.

Artificial intelligence itself presents additional dangers. Rapid advances—coupled with persisting issues such as hallucinations and misuse—sparked global concern. The United States, Russia, and China are integrating AI into defense systems, even as the US revoked previous AI-safety directives. AI-driven misinformation threatens to destabilize the information environment needed to address global crises.

Compounding all risks is the rise of nationalistic autocracy, particularly in nuclear-armed countries. (1) Zero-sum rhetoric and diminished accountability hinder cooperation and accelerate nuclear, climate, and technological dangers.

It is not inevitable. Nuclear states can resume arms-control talks; nations can regulate emerging biotechnologies and AI; the US can reverse harmful climate policies; and major powers can negotiate AI-related military safeguards. Leaders—especially in the US, Russia, and China—must change course, and citizens must demand action.

<https://thebulletin.org/2026/01/press-release-it-is-85-seconds-to-midnight/>

(1) According to the report of the V-Dem Institute issued at the end of March in 2025, 72% of the global population now lives under autocratic rule. According to Staffan Lindberg, an author and editor of the report, founding director of the Institute, and a professor of political science at the University of Gothenburg, the United States will “definitely” be downgraded and reclassified in next year’s assessment due to the actions of the Trump government: “At the pace at which it is happening,” he noted, “I would say that before the end of the summer [of 2025], you no longer qualify as a democracy in the United States,” adding that “it would mean that the rule of law, the constraints of the executive...would be gone to such an extent that we can no longer talk about even a constitutional republic.” See: <https://www.democracywithoutborders.org/36317/autocracies-outnumber-democracies-for-the-first-time-in-20-years-v-dem/>

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