

Mounting nuclear portents while Rome burns

Andrew Glikson
Earth and paleo-climate scientist
Australian National University

In a recent articleⁱ Noam Chomsky Stated: *"I think the best and most authoritative assessment of Mr Trump's first year was perhaps given by the famous Doomsday Clock. As you know every year since 1947 leading distinguished physicists and political analysts assess the state of the world and set the Doomsday Clock at a certain number of minutes before midnight. Midnight means terminal disaster. It began seven minutes before midnight in 1947 after that atom bombing, it's been oscillating since. Just now a week ago it was moved two minutes to midnight, after a year of Trump. That's the closest it's been to terminal disaster since 1953 when the US and later the USSR exploded thermonuclear weapons demonstrating that human intelligence had now developed the capacity to destroy everything on earth"*



According to Robert Rosner, chair of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists science and security board: *"the president's volatility as expressed in his tweets and statements; the inconsistency of the administration's foreign policy; and its apparent disdain for science, reflected in its high-level appointments, which have included climate change deniers" ... "Our allies and adversaries alike are being forced into a thicket of conflicting policy statements, from a US administration*

weakened in its roster of foreign policy professionals and unable to develop, coordinate and clearly communicate a coherent foreign – much less nuclear – policy”

It has been said that in the nuclear age war is obsoleteⁱⁱ, but around the world tribalism and with it the drums of war are on the rise, including talk of “**usable**” nuclear weaponsⁱⁱⁱ. The atmosphere is reminiscent of pre-WWII suppression of the press the judiciary and academia, extreme nationalism leads to persecution of minorities and ultimately genocide^{iv}, with echoes of “*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles, über alles in der Welt*”^v. A central warmongering role must be “credited” to large parts of the private and the public media, on both sides, portraying “enemies” (we are “good” they are “bad”), including personal vilification of leaders.

Once a nuclear weapon is fired, deliberately or by accident, the “*Use them or lose them*” strategy takes hold, leading to an all-out nuclear war. Under the rising tensions a rapidly rising probability now exists of false flag events or nuclear accidents, such as in the past, for example^{vi}:

- (13.2.1950): A Convair B-36B crashed in northern British Columbia after jettisoning a Mark IV atomic bomb.
- (22.5.1957): A 42,000-pound Mark-17 hydrogen bomb accidentally fell from a bomber near Albuquerque, New Mexico.
- (7.6.1960): The Fort Dix IM-99 accident destroyed a Boeing CIM-10 Bomarc nuclear missile and shelter and contaminated the BOMARC Missile.
- (24.1.1961): A B-52 Stratofortress carrying two Mark 39 nuclear bombs broke up in mid-air, dropping its nuclear payload in the process.
- (1965) A-4 crash Philippine Sea. A Skyhawk attack aircraft with a nuclear weapon fell into the sea. The pilot, the aircraft, and the B43 nuclear bomb were never recovered.
- (17.1.1966): A Palomares crash of a B-52G bomber of the USAF which collided with a KC-135 tanker during mid-air refueling off the coast of Spain. Of the four Mk28 type hydrogen bombs the B-52G carried three were found on land near Almería, Spain.
- (21.1.1968): B-52 crash involved a United States Air Force (USAF) B-52 bomber carrying four hydrogen bombs when a cabin fire forced the crew to abandon the aircraft. The bomber crashed onto sea ice in Greenland, which resulted in widespread radioactive contamination.

- (18.9.1980): A Titan missile equipped with a nuclear warhead exploded at Damascus, Arkansas.

Several flash points exist. Since China and Russia reside in close proximity to North Korea, a war on the peninsula would contaminate huge swathes of their territory, and also Japan, with radioactive fallout, leading to hundreds of millions of refugees, destroyed crops and livestock, and other unthinkable consequences^{vii}. Accidental mishaps such as a downing of a US or a Russian aircraft in Syria, the Ukraine, South China Sea or the Black Sea, by the other side, could trigger outcomes affecting large regions or the planet.

If the cold war post-WWII contained ideological factors, namely competition between different social systems, free enterprise and socialism, this factor is difficult to identify since the Russian, Chinese, or North Korean societies can hardly be described as “socialist” or “communist”. Rather the new cold war is taking place between a western system dominated by corporations accompanied by more or less free elections, and the Russian and Chinese systems where societies and markets are controlled by central governments. Likely the conflict is driven by the ages-long adversity between major power block, such as has triggered World War I..

None of these political systems appears to be able to cope with climate disruption. If science has ever communicated a critical message to humanity, it is that changing the composition of the atmosphere bears unacceptable consequences. In the US the new administration has appointed a cadre of avowed climate denialists and quickly started reversing existing climate measures^{viii}. Lawrence Krauss, the chair of the bulletin’s board of sponsors, said that *“2017 marked that the first time since the position was created more than a half-century ago that there was no presidential science adviser. The White House office of science and technology policy is essentially not staffed ... The official mechanisms to tie public policy to reality are currently absent.”*

Unfortunately in Australia the government recently declined to congratulate ICAN (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons) on their Nobel peace prize^{ix}. The PM, previously (12.8.2010) declaring *“We are as humans conducting a massive science experiment with this planet. It’s the only planet we’ve got”*, now presiding over large-scale coal mining and export, does not appear to be overly concerned (*“I have never had more fun in my life”^x*). At a time when

more than at any other time in human history international cooperation rather than competition is paramount if the realm is to be saved, “conservative” forces, fossil fuel lobbies and armament merchants of death are pushing humanity over the cliff.

ⁱ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-02-07/noam-chomsky-talks-donald-trump-nuclear-war-tpa-and-australia/9406072>

ⁱⁱ <https://politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/apsa1991.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/09/us-to-loosen-nuclear-weapons-policy-and-develop-more-usable-warheads>

^{iv} <http://alphahistory.com/worldwar1/nationalism/>

^v <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/deutschland-uber-alles-and-america-first-in-song>

^{vi} <http://www.springer.com/gp/book/9783319572369>

^{vii} <https://www.news24.com/Columnists/GuestColumn/how-china-and-russia-can-prevent-world-war-iii-2017113>

^{viii} <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/25/doomsday-clock-ticked-forward-trump-nuclear-weapons-climate-change>

^{ix} <https://theconversation.com/instead-of-congratulating-ican-on-its-nobel-peace-prize-australia-is-resisting-efforts-to-ban-the-bomb-88940>

^x <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5033195/Malcolm-Turnbull-never-fun-life.html>