



The Doomsday Clock has never been closer to metaphorical midnight. What does it mean?

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By

[Rachel Treisman](#)



The 2025 Doomsday Clock — displayed at the United States Institute of Peace in Washington, D.C. on Tuesday — is the closest it's ever been to midnight.

Kayla Bartkowski/Getty Images

Humanity is closer than ever to catastrophe, according to the atomic scientists behind the Doomsday Clock.

The ominous metaphor ticked one second closer to midnight this week. The clock now stands just 89 seconds away — its first move [in two years](#) and the closest the clock come to midnight in its nearly eight-decade history.

"The 2025 Clock time signals that the world is on a course of unprecedented risk, and that continuing on the current path is a form of madness," announced the [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#), the nonprofit organization that sets the clock each year.



WORLD

'Doomsday Clock' signals existential threats of nuclear war, climate disasters and AI

The group meets annually to assess how close humanity is to self-destruction based on three main factors: climate change, nuclear proliferation and disruptive technologies (such as artificial intelligence).

This year, it cited continuing trends in multiple "global existential threats" including nuclear weapons, climate change, AI, infectious diseases and conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. It also pointed to the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories as a "potent threat multiplier" that undermines public discourse in general and about these very issues.

While these threats are not new, the scientists said that "despite unmistakable signs of danger, national leaders and their societies have failed to do what is needed to change course."

They are particularly concerned about the U.S., China and Russia, countries they say have the "collective power to destroy civilization" and the "prime responsibility to pull the world back from the brink."



NATIONAL SECURITY

The End May Be Nearer: Doomsday Clock Moves Within 100 Seconds Of Midnight

The Bulletin hopes the movement of the clock's second hand — as incremental as it may seem — will serve as a wake-up call to world leaders.

"National leaders must commence discussions about these global risks before it's too late," said Daniel Holz, the chair of the Bulletin's Science and Security Board.

"Reflecting on these life-and-death issues and starting a dialogue are the first steps to turning back the Clock and moving away from midnight."

It's not impossible — the clock has moved both backward and forward since its creation in 1947.

The Doomsday Clock came out of nuclear concerns after WWII



Robert Rosner, chairman of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, moves the minute hand of the Doomsday Clock to two minutes to midnight in January 2018.

Carolyn Kaster/AP

The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists was founded in 1945 by a group of Chicago-based scientists who had worked on the world's first atomic bomb and wanted to educate the public about the consequences of nuclear weapons.

Early editions of the bulletin started out as collections of articles, and editors eventually decided to package them as a magazine with an eye-catching cover, according to the [University of Chicago](#).



SCIENCE

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MOVIE INTERVIEWS

'Like it or not, we live in Oppenheimer's world,' says director Christopher Nolan

Bulletin member and artist Martyl Langsdorf was tasked with coming up with the illustration. Langsdorf — who was married to a Manhattan Project physicist — sketched out a few ideas, including a clock counting down to the exchange of nuclear weapons.

"It was a rather realistic clock but it was the IDEA of using a clock to signify urgency," she [later wrote](#).

She set the original hands at seven minutes to midnight because "it looked good to my eye."

The clock graced the cover of the 1947 Bulletin and has remained its iconic image ever since — even as the threats it considers and the placement of the clock's hands have changed over time.

The threat levels — and threats themselves — have evolved

The Bulletin has repositioned the clock hands [26 times](#) since 1947.

It first moved — from seven to three minutes before midnight — in 1949, after the Soviet Union successfully tested its first atomic bomb. At the time, the prospect of a nuclear arms race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was considered the greatest danger to humanity.

"We do not advise Americans that doomsday is near and that they can expect atomic bombs to start falling on their heads a month or year from now," the Bulletin warned. "But we think they have reason to be deeply alarmed and to be prepared for grave decisions."



CLIMATE

How is the world doing on climate change? Not great

Throughout the Cold War, the clock periodically moved back and forth — from two to upwards of 10 minutes to midnight — based largely on global conflicts and nuclear proliferation.



Dr. Leonard Rieser, chairman of the board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, moves the hand of the Doomsday Clock back to 17 minutes before midnight at offices near the University of Chicago on Nov. 26, 1991.

Carl Wagner/Chicago Tribune/Tribune News Service via Getty Images

The clock was its farthest from midnight — a sizable 17 minutes — in 1991, with the end of the Cold War and the signing of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty between the U.S. and Soviet Union.

The start of the 21st century brought new types of threats, from the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks to rising concerns about climate change, which the Bulletin began to consider in its clock-setting deliberations in 2007.



GOATS AND SODA

How do you stay optimistic in spite of it all? 6 hopeful souls share their secrets

The clock hit two minutes to midnight — the closest it had been since the 1950s — in 2018, due to what scientists described as a breakdown in the international order of nuclear actors and a lack of action on climate change. It dropped to 100 seconds in 2020 and 90 seconds in 2023, where it stayed until it reached its record level this year.

While the Doomsday Clock [has been criticized](#) by some over the years as being alarmist and inaccurate, its operators maintain they are drawing a conclusion from events and trends, not trying to predict the future.

"The Bulletin is a bit like a doctor making a diagnosis," they write. "We consider as many symptoms, measurements, and circumstances as we can. Then we come to a judgment that sums up what could happen if leaders and citizens don't take action to treat the conditions."

While the warning is primarily targeted at people in power, the Bulletin says civilians can respond by learning about the threats from nuclear weapons and climate change, discussing them with others and lobbying their representatives.

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