

Canada quiet as Ukraine war inches Doomsday Clock closer to midnight

With the risk of nuclear weapons being used in the war, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists says the globe has entered ‘a time of unprecedented danger.’ Minister of Foreign Affairs Mélanie Joly speaks with reporters in June 2022. A Global Affairs response to the extreme warning Doomsday Clock tightening to 90 seconds to midnight is just business-as-usual for Canada, writes Douglas Roche.

OPINION | BY DOUGLAS ROCHE | January 30, 2023 | HILL-TIMES

EDMONTON—The most shocking thing about moving the Doomsday Clock to 90 seconds to midnight—the closest to global catastrophe it has ever been—is that nobody seems very shocked by it. The world has become inured to a looming Armageddon, and that is truly scary.

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists launched the clock in 1947 at the beginning of the Cold War, symbolizing how close humanity is to self-annihilation. That year, the hands of the clock were set at seven minutes to midnight, indicating moderate risk. In 1991, the Cold War over and a new era of East-West peaceful relations seemingly beginning, the hands were set back to 17 minutes to midnight.

For the following three decades, the clock shifted steadily forward. For the past three years, it was set at 100 seconds before midnight to signify that humanity faces two simultaneous existential dangers—nuclear war and climate change. “The international security situation is dire,” the Bulletin said, “not just because these threats exist, but because world leaders have allowed the international political infrastructure for managing them to erode.” This year, the clock has been advanced 10 seconds because, with Russia threatening to use nuclear weapons in the Ukraine war, we have entered “a time of unprecedented danger.” There is no path to a just peace under the shadow of nuclear weapons, the Bulletin said, adding: find a path to serious peace negotiations in Ukraine. At a minimum, the scientists added, the U.S. must keep the door open to principled engagement with Moscow, reducing the dangerous increase in nuclear risk the war has fostered. “Every second counts.” I asked Global Affairs Canada for the government’s response to the Bulletin’s urgent plea for action. I received a statement repeating Canada’s condemnation of Russia’s nuclear rhetoric as reckless. “Russia’s actions have shaken the foundations of the international world order.” Canada continues to uphold the Non-Proliferation Treaty and “encourage[s] nuclear risk reduction measures and further steps towards nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation.”

In other words, the extreme warning of the Doomsday Clock is just business-as-usual for Canada. There was no Canadian appeal for negotiations to end the Ukraine war, no recognition the Non-Proliferation Treaty is failing its primary duty to negotiate nuclear disarmament, no request to that the U.S. and Russia start talks to renew the soon-to-expire treaty limiting strategic nuclear weapons, and certainly no acceptance of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which bans nuclear weapons outright.

The kind of answer I had hoped for from Canada was actually uttered by Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland: “The Doomsday Clock is sounding an alarm for the whole of humanity. We are on the brink of a precipice. But our leaders are not acting at sufficient speed or scale to secure a peaceful and liveable planet.” There is no doubt Canada wants to see the Ukraine war end, but the route to that end is seen by the government through the prism of more military hardware. NATO is focused on more tanks for Ukraine instead of a negotiated solution that would produce mutual security for Ukraine and Russia. It is this standard military thinking that the Doomsday Clock is trying to overcome. But does anybody care? Are people out on the streets protesting against government mismanagement of the planet’s future? Is any politician calling for an emergency summit meeting of the UN Security Council? Has the movement to abolish nuclear weapons suddenly taken on new strength?

Public outrage against the desecration of humanity is blunted. People have become accustomed to warnings from experts that the modernization of nuclear weapons is preparing the way for another Hiroshima. The public stays passive at the dramatic evidence of climate change in the rapidly increasing rate of violent storms. The scenes of millions of desperate refugees displaced by wars and droughts have become all too familiar.

Our society is becoming hardened to tragedy. Even the very real threats of human catastrophe, the outlines of which are being sketched by the scientific community every day, are met with a shrug. Fatalism has set in, a sense that nuclear weapons and climate change, and even the never-ending variants of COVID, are such big problems that they are beyond the ordinary person’s grasp. Add to this ennui massive distrust in government as the agent of solutions to world crises, and the sense of helplessness merely expands. We should be crying out, imploring action to turn the hands of the Doomsday Clock back from midnight.

I am reminded of the torch singer Peggy Lee’s famous song, “Is That All There Is?” Standing in front of her blues band, Lee wistfully sang of clowns and dancing bears at the circus and then, when it was over, plaintively asked:

Is that all there is?

If that's all there is, my friends Then let's keep dancing.

Douglas Roche asked Global Affairs Canada on Jan. 24: “The Doomsday Clock now stands at 90 seconds to midnight — the closest to global catastrophe it has ever been. What steps is Canada taking to relieve the threat of use of nuclear weapons at this perilous moment?””

Global Affairs Canada replied on Jan. 25: “Canada condemns Russia’s nuclear rhetoric as reckless and unacceptable. Russia’s egregious actions in Ukraine continues to pose serious threats to the safety, security, and safeguards of Ukraine’s nuclear facilities, and contravene international law. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a depositary state of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Russia’s actions have shaken the foundations of the international world order. We look forward to working with Japan and our other G7 partners on the issue of nuclear non-proliferation which has been identified as a priority for this year’s meeting. Canada continues to uphold the NPT and work with partners and allies to encourage nuclear risk reduction measures and further steps towards nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. We also continue to call all military activities near nuclear power plants to cease immediately. Canada condemns Russia’s nuclear rhetoric as reckless and unacceptable. Russia’s egregious actions in Ukraine continues to pose serious threats to the safety, security, and safeguards of Ukraine’s nuclear facilities, and contravene international law. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a depositary state of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Russia’s actions have shaken the foundations of the international world order. We look forward to working with Japan and our other G7 partners on the issue of nuclear non-proliferation which has been identified as a priority for this year’s meeting. Canada continues to uphold the NPT and work with partners and allies to encourage nuclear risk reduction measures and further steps towards nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. We also continue to call all military activities near nuclear power plants to cease immediately. We are engaged with the International Atomic Energy Agency-led monitoring mission.”