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The Doomsday Clock (created by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists) has been retained at 3 minutes to midnight. Though the Clock has been closer to Doomsday in 1953 - it was two minutes away then when the threat of nuclear catastrophe seemed very real soon after the H-Bomb was first tested by both USA & USSR - the witching hour seems nearer to us than ever before. Things seem a far cry from 1991 when the Clock moved to 17 minutes from midnight - the best time ever, when the Cold War and the communist era ended and it appeared that days of sanity & a climate of hope was once again upon us.

However, we are back where we started, and unfortunately, this time around conditions seem just right for a perfect storm with new threats having arisen that makes the pessimists' dire predictions a near certainty.

Let's look at some of the new concerns that are overwhelming us:

- The rise of ISIS: Most parts of the world have difficulty in understanding how the prospect of an Islamic Caliphate is appealing in the 21st century. Picture a medieval world where men and women are unequal, where 'civil rights' are an alien term, where teenagers are offered guns and instructions on suicide, pledged to jihad, instead of a pen and lessons in science, and you are convinced that Man has not progressed from his animal self. The threat of ISIS is not just a

Will the force awaken?

battle for territory but a war of ideology that wishes to take human civilization in a new direction. The sad fact is that this vision of the international Caliphate is more frightening to the civilized world than any socio-political framework presented ever before, and in comparison the Taliban and Al-Qaida (along with local terror outfits like Boka Haram, Al-Shabaab, etc.) seem like pygmy forces. The unerring conclusion is that the failure of the civilized world (led by Europe and the US but not restricted to them alone) to face the challenges at the right time in an united manner provided a fertile ground for the emergence of this feudal, outdated mind-set and evil force which has destroyed Syria, Libya and large parts of Iraq and threatens the rest of the Middle East (and later the world). The real source of strength of ISIS is the inability of the rational nations of the world to speak with one voice against it. The price that is being paid for this failure is the spread of attacks that has impacted a large geography from Russia (the plane disaster over Egypt) to the US (the San Bernardino shootings) to France (the multiple tragedies in Paris) and Jakarta (the recent spate of bombings). And, sadly, there will be more disasters in the offing as the neocolonyes of ISIS are mushrooming like a rash across countries.

- The threat of disease and contagion is never over: the Middle Ages had the bubonic plague and in our times we have all become familiar with acronyms that together have spelt death of millions. I refer to AIDS, SARS, MERS, Bird Flu, Swine Flu, Ebola and now ZIKA. Just when you think the worst is over (when a new vaccine has been developed and deployed widely), comes some new form of unknown disease. While one can agree that nature has not revealed all its secrets to us and science has not been allowed to shine

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in its full glory, the fact is that we are still far from achieving the basic universal health standards as enumerated in the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations. Medical emergencies are constantly lurking around the bend, threatening to take epidemic proportions and testing mankind's innovative abilities to contain them.

- Perhaps the biggest danger of all is the leadership bankruptcy across the political divide around the world. 2016 is election year in many parts of the world. All eyes are naturally on a defining election in November 2016: when the free world's most powerful nation chooses its leader in the United States. While the race is warming up, sadly, the candidates in the fray have made headlines for all the wrong reasons. It is all right to pledge to make your country great, but the means one chooses is as important as the goals you have set. Mario Cuomo, the celebrated Governor of New York once famously said that 'You campaign in poetry and you govern in prose'. However, if the words during the campaign are stinging, hurtful and damaging in nature, the divisions and fractures caused in the society are often irreparable. This fact seems to have escaped the notice of all the Republican candidates who currently are destroying whatever little goodwill and credibility the nation has earned in decades.

- The collateral damage (what an interesting word that attempts to diminish the price of destruction) of the

conflict in the Middle East is the wave of immigrants that are testing the patience and friendliness of European hosts. Denmark has already passed a new law in the parliament to make the refugees pay their way in their new setting. While the picture of Aylan Kurdi on the beach tugged at heart strings across the world, the pragmatists in Europe are confronting reality now. The question that they are asking is valid and an awkward one too: why is it that powerful and rich Arab neighbours are not an obvious choice for refugees and migrants when in trouble? With border barriers already up in a few parts of eastern Europe and travel restrictions with increased border scrutiny in at least 6 countries so far, the Schengen visa will soon become history, many analysts believe. Is this the shape of things to come - as the European nations are under strain like never before? Already buffeted under pressure from the Greek economic crisis, EU nations may not have the steadfastness or the resolve to weather the storm caused in their social fabric with a sudden and huge influx of immigrants with a different world-view.

- Is the crash in oil prices and the overall slide of commodities' prices in general a precursor to a new recessionary phase in the global economy? Some economists are predicting and are talking of a 7 years economic cycle. The truth about the Chinese economy will never be clearly known but has caused enough heartburn across the world. African nations are among the most vulnerable to pain all-around not just because of the over-reliance on commodities but also because of the drying up of Chinese investments. While the Gulf oil producers (chiefly, Saudi Arabia) may have monetary buffers to tide over the present tough times (though this theory is about to be severely tested too), the oil producers in Africa (for instance, Nigeria) and South American countries (Venezuela, etc.) will

be the biggest losers in the current phase. Iran being welcomed back on the world stage will be a game changer - they not only have the oil but also a nationwide industrial backbone to help them fast-forward their economic recovery. This will make a significant change in the global geo-political arena.

- The other big story of 2016 is the speculation that we are seeing the end of BRICs. Sure, Brazil and Russia are in crisis (Brazil more than ever before) - but I would not write them off as they are significant growth economies despite the current challenges.

- And, then there is Climate change. According to the World Meteorological Organization the truth of global warming is more than evidenced by data that temperatures over the period 2011 to 2015 have been the highest ever seen in the world. The silver lining is that at the COP 21 Paris conference world leaders have finally moved ahead with some commitments, though one could have asked for more. However, it is reassuring to note that 195 countries did get together at Paris to make this a part of their national agenda.

Strange as it may seem, despite the litany of woes listed above, I am confident that the Doomsday Clock will be re-adjusted a year from now. We will lurch from crisis to crisis but the deeper forces of survival will bring us back from the brink of any catastrophe. Yes, the Force will awaken to fight the negative elements around us. What is necessary for us is to stay true to the path of humanity (though seemingly in short supply at the moment) and retain faith in a better future.

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