

Rethinking National Security: Some Post-Cold War Nuclear Risks

[Prof. Martin Hellman](#), Stanford University

Even if the risk of World War III were only 1-in-500 each year — so we could expect to go 500 years before it occurred — the cumulative risk over the roughly 80 year life expectancy of a child born today would be close to 1-in-6, the risk in Russian roulette. Are we playing Russian roulette with the next generation of Americans? Is 500 years too optimistic and the risk even greater? As the following examples show, and contrary to conventional wisdom, the risk did not evaporate at the end of the Cold War. Isn't it time we started to rethink national security?

1. During the 1999 Kosovo Crisis, British Lt. Gen. Mike Jackson was repeatedly ordered by his superior, American Gen. Wesley Clark, to take action that risked armed conflict with Russian troops. Both Gen. Jackson and Gen. Clark agree that a heated argument ensued and it ended when Gen. Jackson basically refused the order and told Gen. Clark, "Sir, I'm not going to start World War Three for you."
2. Confusion and panic during the 9/11 attacks led an airborne F-16 pilot to mistakenly believe that the US was under attack by Russians instead of terrorists. In a dangerous coincidence, the Russian Air Force had scheduled an exercise that day, in which strategic bombers were to be flown toward the United States. Fortunately, the Russians learned of the terrorist attack in time to ground their bombers. The F-16 pilot testified, "I reverted to the Russian threat. . . . I'm thinking cruise missile threat from the sea. You know you look down and see the Pentagon burning and I thought the bastards snuck one by us. . . . no one [had] told us anything."
3. In July 2008, a "Cuban Bomber Mini-Crisis" occurred when we repeated five and a half of the six mistakes that led to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Because the final half step was avoided, almost no one is aware of this mini-crisis. More details start on page 5 of [this handout](#).
4. The August 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia would have produced a major crisis if President George W. Bush had followed through on his earlier promise to Georgia that "the American people will stand with you." The danger is compounded because most Americans are unaware that an EU investigation concluded that Georgia fired the first shots and Russia is not solely to blame. Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin, reflecting the mood of many Americans at the time, said that the United States should be ready to go to war with Russia if the conflict flared up again.
5. The ongoing dispute between Japan and China over the Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands puts the ability to start a fire fight in the hands of individual pilots and ships' captains. If a plane is shot down or a ship sunk, the dispute would escalate into a crisis.
6. The current Ukrainian crisis coupled with Russia's conventional inferiority has led it to make nuclear threats in an effort to deter our becoming more deeply involved. The risk of further escalation is increased because both the US and Russia see the other party as solely to blame, whereas both have made mistakes.
7. The ongoing Syrian civil war could have produced a major crisis in November 2015, when Turkey shot down a Russian jet near its border with Syria, killing the pilot. If Russia had retaliated, which it fortunately did not, Turkey probably would have cited our NATO commitment to treat an attack on them just as if we ourselves had been attacked.

To return to the home page of Rethinking National Security [click here](#).