Rare and unthinkable events, popularly known as black swans and perfect storms, “are not reasons for lack of pro-active management” writes risk analysis expert Elizabeth Paté-Cornell. Nuclear war is the black swan we can never see says Seth Baum. The risk looms large and an inadvertent detonation a possibility.

Between 1950 and 1968, 1,200 nuclear weapons were involved in accidents in the US alone. “Poor practices in nuclear weapons management have occurred at all levels of decision-making in the past, are still happening today and are likely to continue in the future,” says the 2014 Chatham House report Too Close for Comfort.

The Cold War saw two major crises that almost escalated into full-scale nuclear war. The first and most infamous was the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 when tensions almost resulted in a Soviet submarine launching a nuclear armed torpedo.

In 1983, a NATO military exercise codenamed Abel Archer took place during particularly strained relations between East and West, causing the Soviet government to put its arsenal on high alert in preparation for a preemptive nuclear strike.

A 1998 study commissioned by the New England Journal of Medicine exploring the possibility of “Accidental Nuclear War” concluded that the risk was actually higher since the end of the Cold War. A launch based on false warnings was seen as a very plausible scenario, since a breakdown in communication could be influenced by both human and technical error.

A report by Bruce G. Blair, on the failures of intelligence agencies, using a hypothetical accidental nuclear launch to support its argument, points to the risk from the continuing policies of the US and Russia to keep many weapons on high alert. “….. pressure-packed timelines reduce decision making to checklists, and increase both the likelihood and the consequences of human and technical error in the nuclear attack warning and command system.”

Both the United States and Russia rely heavily on orbital early warning systems, complex networks of satellites built to detect a nuclear launch.

However, Russia’s system has deteriorated greatly in these last two decades—in 1995, a scientific Norwegian rocket was almost mistaken for a nuclear launch.

Conversely, the United States has been developing missile defence that remains a source of contention.

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