

Everybody's Doing It: Short Volatility Strategies and Shadow Financial Insurers

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The extraordinary growth of short volatility strategies creates risks that may trigger the next serious market crash. A low-yield, low-volatility environment has drawn various market participants into essentially similar short volatility-contingent strategies with a common nonlinear risk factor. We discuss these strategies, their commonalities, and the generally unrecognized risks that they would pose if everyone were to unwind simultaneously. Volatility-selling investors essentially provide “shadow financial insurance.” Investors and regulators would benefit from preparing for large, self-reinforcing technical unwinds that may occur when central banks change policy, or macro or political events affect investor confidence. We also discuss potential mechanisms that might provide stabilization against catastrophic financial outcomes.

Disclosure: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of LongTail Alpha, LLC; the USC Marshall School of Business; or Interactive Brokers. Further information appears at the end of this article.

Editor's Note

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Traders who sell volatility essentially sell financial insurance. They allow other traders to profit when extreme events occur. The other traders often buy volatility to hedge portfolio risks. The simplest examples of volatility selling involve the sale of put and call contracts. Traders also can sell volatility when they trade products defined on volatility indexes, such as the CBOE Volatility Index (the VIX). Finally, many traders create short volatility positions when they engage in complex volatility-contingent trading strategies, such as risk parity and risk premium harvesting.

Volatility as an asset class was once the exclusive domain of sophisticated hedge fund managers and Wall Street dealers. With the creation of various exchange-traded volatility products, now almost anyone can easily trade volatility, and many do. Although the total size of these products is still small, they now have the greatest direct impact on the VIX futures markets. Because many other strategies follow the VIX for risk allocation, large gyrations in the VIX affect the behavior of larger investors, creating a classic “tail wagging the dog” outcome. New volatility products allow even retail investors to act as financial insurers as they seek to earn the volatility risk premium in their stock trading accounts.¹

The need for yield combined with the democratization of volatility selling has resulted in multi-decade lows in volatility. For instance, even though realized volatility in the US equity markets averaged approximately 18% per year since the early 1920s, the VIX, which measures implied volatility, hit a recent low of below 9%. We will discuss how the behavior of participants across

¹As the authors were reviewing comments from reviewers on the initial draft of this paper, the inverse volatility exchange-traded fund XIV lost most of its value on February 6, 2018 due to the VIX spike of 5 February 2018 and was closed by its sponsor.

all investment horizons has been the proximate cause of this low and how the reversal of the behavior will lead to the next volatility spike.

Understanding volatility-contingent investing strategies is important for every investor. Although institutional investors are certainly familiar with volatility, they might be surprised at how far volatility trading and option selling has come in the last few years. Many non-institutional investors, such as retirees, now unknowingly earn a portion of their portfolio returns from income their investment managers generate when they sell options or engage in other strategies with short volatility characteristics.

Herd-like behavior of investment managers can amplify the risks of short volatility-contingent strategies. Past successes invite imitators and can result in excesses. The excesses create instabilities that eventually can cause a cascade of risk reduction when the imitative behavior plays in reverse.

To perceptive observers, signs of crowding in the volatility space abound. Most importantly, many investors have no idea that they have entered essentially similar trading strategies. Accordingly, they do not recognize that liquidity may not be available to them when they want to adjust their positions in response to changing market conditions.

Unfortunately, a defining characteristic of most short volatility-contingent strategies is that their hedging and unwinding trades are destabilizing. When traders hedge and unwind in response to changing market conditions, their trades tend to accelerate those changes, which results in more unwinding trades. This positive feedback may prove to be dangerous.

A severe market environment could expose everyone to rapid and destructive bouts of unwinding. The short volatility ecosystem shows the classic property of a complex system: “the possible occurrence of coherent large-scale collective behaviors with a very rich structure, resulting from the

repeated non-linear interactions among its constituents: The whole turns out to be much more than the sum of its parts” (Sornette 2003, p. 11).

One short volatility strategy—selling volatility through exchange-traded products—is stabilizing over short time horizons. However, the assets deployed in this strategy are small in comparison to those deployed in the other short volatility-contingent strategies. We believe that growth in this small strategy, as well as the media coverage of its recent success, may be partly responsible for the low realized volatility in the markets over the last few years. However, the low realized volatility has emboldened traders in the other volatility-contingent strategies, which has increased the likelihood of shifting from a relatively stable local equilibrium to a very different equilibrium.

Who Trades Volatility-Contingent Strategies?

Investors using volatility-contingent strategies lie along a hierarchical continuum based on their investment time horizons. Exhibit 1 presents the strategies we will discuss in order of their typical investment horizons. This classification is somewhat arbitrary because some investors engage in multiple strategies. The organization of our hierarchy is not important to the main purpose of this article. It simply helps illustrate that the use of volatility-contingent strategies is pervasive across all investor horizons.

Exhibit 1. Volatility-Contingent Strategies

Investor	Comments
<i>Long-horizon investors</i>	
Very long-term investors	The most capable insurers who seek yield enhancement through premium selling. Among all investors, volatility has little effect on them.
Endowments and pension funds	Capable insurers who seek yield enhancement through premium selling. An increase in volatility may reduce or increase their option selling programs depending on other portfolio considerations.
<i>Medium-horizon investors</i>	
Large asset managers	Investors sensitive to relative performance evaluation who seek yield enhancement through premium selling. They tend to liquidate deteriorating positions or sell to maintain delta when volatility rises.
Risk-parity hedge funds	Funds that equalize risk exposure in many asset classes through leverage while maintaining an overall risk target. Increases in long-term volatility expectations across all assets lead to sales to cut overall risk exposure. An increase in asset-specific volatility expectations leads to sales in that asset class.
Risk premium harvesters	Funds that harvest risk premiums in various strategies. Many funds target overall volatility through leverage. Increases in volatility increase risk premiums, making the strategy more attractive, but increases in long-term volatility expectations lead to sales to cut overall risk exposure.
Target volatility funds and variable annuities	Funds that use portfolio insurance strategies to control tail risks to satisfy regulators. When volatility rises, they sell to lower overall portfolio volatility.
<i>Short-horizon investors</i>	
Trend followers	Funds that trade on momentum. Many funds use leverage to weight positions by expected volatility. An increase in expected volatility leads to sales to control risk; a switch in market direction from up to down also leads to sales as trend followers position for the downward trend.
Volatility exchange-traded fund (ETF) and exchange-traded note (ETN) investors	Exchange-traded products allow retail and institutional equity accounts easy access to highly levered short VIX volatility positions designed to earn the volatility carry premium. ETN sponsors must buy volatility to match exposures. Increases in volatility can cause end users to purchase volatility to cover margined positions, which raises the level of the VIX.
Option market makers	Dealers buy volatility to accommodate in-the-money option sellers. They sell out-of-the-money options to hedge. Delta hedging of in-the-money positions is stabilizing, but large volatility increases cause problems.

The discussion of investors that use volatility-contingent strategies would be incomplete without reference to central banks. Central banks, with their

infinite time horizons, are the largest implicit volatility sellers in the market. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, they made an implicit promise through their behavior that they will provide what many consider to be a perpetual put against a rapid selloff in the markets. Whether true or not, the belief that market participants have in this promise has been sufficient to keep a lid on volatility. By purchasing securities in the open markets and thus maintaining high asset prices and low yields, central banks suppressed volatility and thereby protected volatility sellers. As the central banks slowly withdraw this implicit promise, risk aversion among market participants rises. Their trading can destabilize the markets.

Long-Horizon Investors

In this section, we look at volatility investors with the longest horizons.

Very Long-Term Investors.

The longest-horizon volatility investors are mostly institutional investors, such as sovereign wealth funds and large public pensions with very long investment horizons. These investors sell insurance rather than buy it. They supply volatility in the market, and in exchange, they earn a premium.

Much of the volatility selling of these long-horizon investors is through their purchases of assets with embedded option-like characteristics. Asset-backed credit securities are examples of such securities; they generally have substantial prepayment and default options. Long-horizon investors also take short volatility positions when they buy levered companies because these companies become more volatile when values fall. Finally, their investments in private equity funds also expose them to volatility because capital calls tend to arrive when they are least welcome. The liquidity premiums in these investments provide them long-term alpha, but in periods of stress, these strategies become correlated with other short volatility strategies.

For these investors, any finite, nonzero option premium makes their investments—which they would likely undertake anyway—more attractive. Accordingly, often these investors are not sensitive to the implied prices of the options in their portfolios. Their long investment horizons make them steady hands in the market. They are unlikely to turn into buyers of options except to cover their existing short option positions under market stress, regulatory change, or capital calls.

Endowments and Pension Funds.

Very large pension funds and endowments with sophisticated investment staffs who understand the options markets have the second-longest horizons among volatility investors. Given the gigantic size of many of these capital pools, small sold option positions generally will not impair their portfolios in times of large market shocks. By repeatedly selling options over time, they try to enhance their investment yields. In times of market stress, these investors are unlikely to buy options, but they may cut or significantly reduce their option selling programs. Regarding market impact, the practical difference between buying options or refusing to sell options is small. The withdrawal of these participants can substantially increase volatility. We will discuss some conditions under which they might withdraw later in the article.

Medium-Horizon Investors

In this section, we discuss large asset managers, risk-parity funds, risk premium harvesters, and volatility targeting.

Large Asset Managers.

Next in the hierarchy are large asset managers with investment time horizons of three to five years. Investors typically examine track records over such intervals when deciding whether to give managers assets (or more assets) to manage, and these track records largely determine their fees. These managers generally attract funds by delivering alpha (performance in excess of

risk-adjusted returns). To augment their returns and thereby attract more funds, many of these managers sell volatility.

Although most asset managers cannot deviate too far away from their investment guidelines, their guidelines are more permissive today than in the past. They now often allow for the inclusion of derivatives and out-of-index securities. And new exchange-traded products facilitate crossover alternative investment exposures to fixed income and short volatility through instruments that trade on a stock exchange and resemble a stock holding.

Because nonlinear option selling strategies are generally market neutral, in the short run, such strategies look like they do not have any market beta, at least to linear risk models, such as the CAPM. For example, assume that a manager sells both puts and calls simultaneously in the form of a straddle or a strangle with strike prices centered on the current underlying asset value. These combinations have essentially zero delta at inception and thus zero contribution to market beta so that they do not add to the beta budget. Unless a risk monitor considers nonlinear risks, the income earned from selling such options can look like alpha, which provides the manager a performance advantage over competitors who do not sell volatility—as long as the market does not move too much.

Fund managers who sell volatility to augment their returns create a “peso problem” for their investors. They obtain a small, regular augmented return at the cost of rare, very large potential losses.²

Risk-Parity Funds.

Other medium-term volatility participants include investment managers and hedge funds that follow the risk-parity strategy. This strategy equalizes

²See, for example, Evans (1996); Harris (2003, p. 468).

risk contribution across portfolio assets by leveraging up low-volatility assets. These managers do not explicitly sell volatility. Instead, their portfolio composition decisions—which depend on estimates of volatility—are sensitive to changes in volatility and implicitly make them behave as though they are short volatility.

A typical risk-parity fund operates as follows:³ Assume that a fund that invests in equities and bonds has an overall target volatility level of 14% and that volatilities for equities and bonds are 20% and 5%, respectively. To obtain risk parity, the fund can lever up its bond portfolio by four times so that the bond portfolio has the same volatility as the fund's equity portfolio. If the correlation between bonds and equities is zero, portfolio weights of approximately 0.5 and 2.0 will produce the 14% target portfolio volatility with equal risk exposures to bonds and equities. When the correlation between equities and bonds is negative, as is usually assumed, the total risk of the portfolio benefits from diversification and the manager can take larger weights in both assets classes. If equity volatility then falls (rises), the manager must allocate more (less) to equities to maintain the same portfolio volatility target.

Because falling volatility has historically accompanied rising equity markets, risk-parity strategies respond to rising markets as if they are short volatility; that is, they buy more equities as equity volatility falls to target the same overall portfolio volatility. The systemic danger, of course, lies in the converse: When markets fall, volatilities rise, and these funds sell equities, which exacerbates the fall. Although risk-parity funds do not try to replicate options, as do the funds that implement the portfolio insurance strategy, their response to market movements is the same.

³For a more complete description, see Bhansali, Davis, Rennison, Hsu, and Li (2012).

Credible and independent analyst estimates now place the target leverage in risk-parity funds at an all-time high of approximately 2.8 times invested capital. The open interest in the E-mini S&P 500 Index futures contracts (which funds use to obtain equity exposure) and the implied financing costs in these contracts reflect their positions. The open interest is now close to an all-time high, and the implied financing costs are high, at 70–80 bps over LIBOR.

Risk Premium Harvesters.

Risk premium harvesting funds appear next in the continuum. Financial theory going back to Ross (1976) shows that risk-averse investors pay more risk-tolerant investors a premium for risk transfer. Risk premium strategies grew rapidly with the democratization of trading technology and the widespread availability of risk factor models. Many participants now implement this strategy in a form popularized by Ilmanen (2011).

In broad terms, risk premium funds harvest profits from transferring risk. They try to earn the term premium from the fixed-income yield curve, the dividend premium in equities, the carry premium in currencies, and the contango or backwardation premium in commodities. The risk transfer can be implicit, as discussed previously, or explicit—for example, selling delta-hedged straddles.

Risk premium fund strategies vary substantially. Some strategies include momentum, some use “tail hedges” to mitigate short volatility risks, and many factor-based risk premium strategies, especially in equities, do not explicitly engage in carry trades. But all earn their returns for bearing volatility risk that more risk-averse traders pay them to assume.⁴

⁴See Bhansali (2007) for a model of the relationship between currency carry and volatility.

Volatility Targeting.

Volatility targeting is a close cousin of risk parity. Volatility targeting arose when the global financial crisis exposed the equity market tail risk of many variable annuity providers. Regulators then required these providers to demonstrate that another such event would not create the same magnitude of financial distress. Providers can satisfy this obligation by purchasing long-dated equity put options or by engaging in dynamic trading strategies that effectively produce protective put options.

Because purchasing puts is very expensive, most annuity providers use dynamic trading strategies. To target a given level or range of overall portfolio volatility, the simplest strategy systematically sells equity index futures (say, S&P 500 Index futures) if volatility rises and buys the futures if volatility falls. Because changes in volatility (usually with reference to the VIX) drive the response function, this strategy is also implicitly short volatility. For instance, when volatility rises, volatility targeters will sell futures to lower portfolio volatility to their target on the assumption that increased volatility will accompany market declines, as it has in the past. Like risk parity, this strategy is destabilizing to the market and thus poses a systemic risk.

Short-Horizon Investors

In this section, we discuss trend followers, volatility ETF and ETN investors, and market makers.

Trend Followers.

Next in the volatility continuum are the trend followers. Because Fung and Hsieh (2001) showed that trend followers' return distributions look like those of long volatility strategies, analysts might assume at first glance that their trading does not contribute to the short volatility behaviors that we are discussing. But volatility plays a dual role in trend followers' portfolios. First, diversified trend followers weight the many assets in their portfolios by their

confidence in the trends they are following and by their relative volatilities. If the volatility of a specific asset class, such as equities, falls, they increase the weight of those assets in their portfolios. Conversely, when volatility rises in an equity market selloff, trend followers, who typically will have been long during the run-up, reduce their equity positions. Second, like volatility targeters, most trend followers also target overall portfolio volatility. If the volatilities of all asset classes fall, trend followers lever all asset classes to maintain their overall volatility targets.

In scenarios where equity volatility is very low, and all other asset classes also have low volatility, trend followers' exposure to equities increases from both relative weighting and overall portfolio weighting. For sharp market turns following a market rise accompanied by large volatility changes, their overall behavior is initially similar to that of other short volatility players: They will sell equities. But trend followers will start selling even more equities if they believe that the new trend is downward. They are thus likely to amplify market selloffs.

Volatility ETF and ETN Investors.

The introductions of exchange-traded volatility products—VIX futures contracts in 2004, listed VIX option contracts in 2006, and volatility ETFs and ETNs in 2009—facilitated short-term volatility trading by traders at the short-horizon end of the volatility investor continuum. Before these developments, traders who wished to sell volatility had to sell many calls and puts and roll these positions when they expired.⁵ Now ETF and ETN providers package esoteric volatility strategies into securities that trade on stock exchanges.⁶

⁵Large institutional traders could also sell volatility swaps.

⁶Volatility ETFs and ETNs track synthetic volatility indexes that are based on VIX futures prices. The ETFs mechanically provide exposure to these indexes by following a prescribed VIX futures rolling strategy, and the issuers of ETNs hedge their positions using similar strategies.

These instruments allow retail and institutional traders to sell volatility easily—usually by simply taking long positions in inverse volatility ETFs or shorting long volatility ETFs.

Both strategies allow traders to participate in the positive expected returns and high Sharpe ratios historically associated with selling volatility. Mechanically, these returns are due to the normally upward-sloping VIX futures term structure: When the market is stable or rising, short-term volatility is low, but long-term volatility stays high owing to the purchase of insurance by risk-averse investors. Selling VIX futures thus creates roll-down profits as time passes if volatility does not change much. The roll-down profit, of course, is the premium earned for selling insurance on which no claims are made.

Although selling VIX futures and rolling down the curve has long been a popular strategy for hedge funds, retail investors and most investment advisers could not easily implement this strategy until ETFs and ETNs came along. Many traders now engage in these strategies, influenced in large part by the academics and practitioners who have written much about their potential profit opportunities.⁷ Further, such news articles as Ciolli (2017)—about a former Target manager who became a multimillionaire by shorting volatility—have grabbed investors’ imaginations.

The incredible success of the short volatility strategy over the last year substantially increased interest in it because many traders tend to follow trading profits. For example, because of the secular decline in volatility (and a technical compounding effect), the inverse volatility ETF SVXY (ProShares

For instance, the ETF SVXY uses the inverse of the S&P 500 VIX Short-Term Futures Index as its reference.

⁷See Kozhan, Neuberger, and Schneider (2010); Alexander and Korovilas (2012).

Short VIX Short-Term Futures ETF) has been one of the best-performing assets over the last year, with a Sharpe ratio of approximately 4! During the year ending 30 September 2017, the equity invested in SVXY doubled.

As of early February 2018, short volatility ETFs accounted for a significant portion of the total volatility risk (or “vega”) in the VIX futures complex. Recent estimates show that short volatility ETNs have a net short vega of \$100 million for every one-point move in the front VIX futures contract. These estimates also show that the providers of inverse and levered ETNs would need to buy almost \$50 million of additional vega for a one-point increase in the VIX futures contract to rebalance their products. Because these ETN providers are agents and are price insensitive, they usually rebalance near the close of the market. If they do all their rebalancing in VIX futures contracts, they would buy close to 15% of the current 650,000 contracts of open interest in the VIX futures complex just for rebalancing.

Market Makers.

Both Wall Street dealers and high-frequency market makers provide liquidity to volatility sellers by buying the options that they sell. To recoup the time decay of the long option positions they inherit, these participants usually engage in continuous delta hedging of the positions. For small fluctuations in the market, the strategy of delta hedging requires them to buy if the market goes down and sell if the market goes up. By doing so, they locally act to stabilize the markets. However, many dealers also sell other options that are further out of the money to manage the overall time decay and volatility exposures, so for large movements in the markets, they are likely to also behave like other short volatility participants.

The Other Side

Not everyone can sell volatility. Every seller requires a buyer that takes the other side. The buyers include dealer desks, hedgers, and asset allocators,

among many others. They undoubtedly also include millions of baby boomers who are switching from equities to fixed income as they age.

Over the last few years, traders have been exchanging volatility at rapidly decreasing prices. In 2017, the VIX and many other indicators of volatility across asset classes hit multi-decade lows. These lows indicate that seller interest exceeded buyer interest in volatility.

The current short volatility bias is historically extreme. Such extremes often reverse quickly and violently. Indeed, the inverse is also true. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the bias was toward buying volatility, with many of the same participants listed previously pushing prices up. At the peak of the crisis, the demand for tail insurance and hedging pushed the price volatility to extreme levels. Many participants—including us—believed that such high levels of volatility would likely result in risk premium profits for volatility sellers, as has largely been the case since the crisis.

Could a Volatility Cascade Lead to a Correlated Asset Market Crash?

The possibility that the participants we have discussed may act in concert is alarming because uncoordinated but correlated behavior could trigger a significant volatility event. Rises in implied volatility would likely cause many of those traders to sell securities to adjust their hedges. Such selling would increase implied volatility, which would lead to more asset sales. A crash would occur if this feedback loop exhausted the normal liquidity that stabilizes markets.

The following are some issues that should elevate concerns.

The level of assets under management in volatility-contingent strategies is large.

Adding implicit volatility sellers, such as risk-parity funds (estimated at \$500 billion), volatility targeting funds (\$350 billion), risk premium harvesting

funds (\$300 billion), and trend followers (\$300 billion), to explicit sellers, such as pension overwriting funds (\$50 billion), dedicated option funds (\$10 billion), ETPs (Exchange Traded Products) and ETNs (\$3 billion), and VIX-related strategies (\$3 billion), yields a total invested in short volatility-contingent strategies of over \$1.5 trillion. Recent estimates by credible market sources suggest that this sum is large enough to present a significant risk should they all trade in the same direction.⁸ These estimates are imprecise; they may be off by a factor of 2. But they show that exposure is extremely large and that a potential simultaneous deleveraging by many investors could be a significant event that would challenge the liquidity of the markets.

The assets in short volatility-contingent strategies continue to grow.

Low levels of realized volatility make low levels of implied volatility appear reasonable and allow managers to justify selling volatility at low prices. Low yield levels also drive growth in short volatility strategies as managers seek to meet yield targets. Low realized volatility also makes long volatility positions less attractive for delta hedgers who might otherwise offset volatility selling.⁹

Confidence in selling volatility continues to grow.

Managers base their volatility-selling activities on backtests and on many academic studies that show that selling volatility is a positive-expected-return activity. Such research provides cover to managers engaged in risky risk premium harvesting strategies. The absence of recent significant volatility also

⁸See, for example, Morgan Stanley (2018).

⁹Delta hedgers buy call options and sell the underlying. When underlying prices rise, they sell more of the underlying, and they repurchase the underlying when prices fall as dictated by the option's gamma. The strategy thus sells high and buys low and is most profitable when substantial transitory volatility regularly moves the markets.

emboldens investors. Many investors now undoubtedly confuse low volatility with low tail risk despite that fact that different factors determine the middle and tails of the return distribution.¹⁰

Asset class diversification has broadened the scope of volatility selling.

Volatility-selling strategies are now widespread across asset classes as short volatility investors seek diversification. As a result, implied volatility has collapsed across all assets. If we think of selling financial insurance as a shadow insurance operation, then just like a multiline insurance company, diversifying across different lines of insurance business makes rational economic sense.

All short volatility strategies are similar.

Regardless of investment horizon, the inverse of volatility is the main factor driving the dynamic portfolio rebalancing associated with short volatility strategies. In a volatility shock, with one small exception that we will discuss later, each strategy will respond in the same direction such that the response of the whole will be larger than the sum of the parts and larger than most participants would expect based on analyses of only their strategies. This self-similarity is an important factor in inducing endogenous long-range correlations between participants at different time horizons.

Investors are not generally aware of the extent to which their strategies are correlated.

Each participant believes that they have some edge or specific mechanism to control downside risk. However, the success of these strategies depends on the liquidity available to them. Traders who do not recognize that

¹⁰See Bhansali (2014); Lempérière, Deremble, Nguyen, Seager, Potters, and Bouchaud (2017).

they will compete for liquidity with investors who are trading strategies that are seemingly different but essentially the same will oversize their positions.

Mechanized trading is common.

Many managers use machine-driven algorithms to implement their volatility-trading strategies automatically. The mechanization ensures that reactions to market moves will be tightly coupled, quick, and price insensitive—three properties that greatly increase the probability and severity of market crashes.¹¹

Participants continue to sell volatility despite declining prices and obvious risks.

Several reasons may explain the persistence of short volatility strategies: low yields elsewhere (substitution), the need for relative performance compared with peers (herding), increasing expected returns as the futures term structure steepens, and a belief that the economy somehow is now different than it was before.

A Simple Model of Instability

To illustrate how option selling at low volatilities can result in large instabilities, consider the purest form of volatility selling—the option straddle. Speculators sell volatility using a straddle when they sell call and put options simultaneously at the same strike and for the same expiration. For this example, consider a one-year straddle on the S&P 500 Index.

When option implied volatility is 30%, the price of this one-year straddle is 23.4% of the index value. The delta of the straddle (the rate of change of the value of the two options with respect to the underlying index value) is close to zero because the deltas of the put and the call largely cancel each other out.

¹¹See Bookstaber (2007) for a discussion of the importance of tight coupling to market crashes.

However—this fact will be important later in this discussion—the rate of change of the delta (gamma) is 2.5. A gamma of 2.6 indicates that the straddle delta will rise 2.6 percentage points (pps) or fall 2.6 pps if the S&P 500 moves up or down by 1%, respectively.

When option implied volatility falls to 20%, which is close to the long-term average for the S&P 500, the price of the straddle falls from 23.4% to 15.7%, which is a 33% reduction of premium. To generate the same yield from option selling, the seller now must sell 50% more straddles. Note that the gamma per notional straddle at this lower volatility increases from 2.6 to 3.9. For the same income, increasing the notional size results in a total gamma that is 2.26 times larger than the gamma for the 30% volatility case. It is larger because the gamma per straddle and the number of straddles both grew.

When volatility is 10%, the price of the straddle falls from 15.7% to 7.8%, a further 50% reduction in price. To maintain the same income as before, the seller must now double the number of straddles, which will require three times as many straddles as when volatility was 30%. The gamma of the straddle with volatility at 10% is 7.8, so with the additional contracts, the gamma of the equal-yielding position is 23.4, or nine times larger than that of the original position.

To understand how this dynamic plays out in time, recall that volatility rose to above 50% during the global financial crisis. Those who sold volatility before the crisis lost substantially, and many withdrew. In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, volatility dropped to 30% and traders selling volatility obtained an attractive risk-reward trade-off. Over the next three years, volatility dropped to its long-term average of 20%, and those traders selling volatility since the crisis had a three-year track record of making excess returns.¹²

¹²See, for example, Li, French, and Chen (2017); Danielsson, Valenzuela, and Zer (2016).

Nothing attracts imitation like success. By late 2010, many more sophisticated investors were selling volatility. The strategy naturally found its way into the broader marketplace as the financial industry happily created products—for example, XIV in November of 2010 and SVXY in October 2011—that allow anyone to sell volatility by buying an exchange-traded product. Volatility selling became institutionalized, and many traders had large short volatility positions.

The potential problem concerns the total gamma of these positions, which is now much higher than it was in 2010. The total gamma increased because gamma increased ninefold owing to the decrease in volatility from 30% to 10%, traders increased their positions to maintain their yields, and new traders started selling volatility.

The substantially increased gamma has strong implications for the quantity of hedging trades that short volatility traders will carry out when underlying index values fall. These trades will be much larger in aggregate than when volatility was at 30%.

Here is the fear: When a decrease in the underlying index causes the delta of the straddle to drop, the delta of the short straddle position (which is equal and opposite in sign) will rise. Short volatility sellers must sell the market index to restore the overall delta of their positions. These hedging sales are destabilizing. Enough such trading could trip the markets into a cascade as the hedgers overwhelm the capacity of the markets to absorb their sales.

The Volatility Crisis Scenario

Putting all these concepts together yields the following potential volatility crisis scenario:

- Some unknown event or constellation of events causes index values to drop or VIX to rise, or both. The events may involve geopolitical, political, or

central banking issues, uncertainties about all of which have risen substantially in the last year.

- A sharp drop in the index causes the delta of short option positions to drop such that short volatility sellers sell the market index to restore the overall delta neutrality of their positions. These sales are destabilizing.
- As values fall, implied volatilities rise as they have in the past as investors try to insure against potential losses. Their purchases of puts cause put writers to sell the underlying index to hedge their positions. These sales exacerbate the problem.
- Institutions that implement mechanical volatility-contingent strategies for which the VIX is a major input parameter (such as risk parity, volatility targeting, and trend following) then reduce their asset exposures as they follow their design specifications and rules. Many of these institutions sell equity index futures as did many institutions using portfolio insurance strategies in 1987. Some also buy volatility at higher prices for safety. These trades further exacerbate the problem.
- Increases in volatility cause investors using volatility-selling strategies (shadow insurance companies) to back off from selling insurance. Some volatility sellers buy in their positions to control their losses. These purchases increase implied volatilities. The increased volatilities feed back to the risk-parity traders, who sell more, which compounds the problem.
- Some volatility insurers repurchase volatility through exchange-traded products. The resulting repricing of these products causes arbitrageurs and ETN providers to buy back VIX futures or volatility derivatives.
- As volatility expectations rise, arbitrageurs bid up the prices of the options so that the actual value of VIX rises.

- Some fearful investors also sell assets to pare their risk exposure. Their sales further exacerbate the problem.
- Simultaneous institutional selling puts pressure on the equity index futures markets, which causes arbitrageurs and others to sell index stocks and other correlated stocks.
- As stocks sell off, other markets (such as high yield and corporate credit) feel the impact. Widening credit spreads could lead to liquidations by credit instrument holders. As credit becomes less available, further liquidations occur in the real economy.

In the worst-case scenario, this shock would cascade across markets and regions, forcing widespread liquidations and rising credit spreads everywhere, as we saw in the last crisis. In the best-case scenario, a lender of last resort would step in and stop the liquidations before they threaten systemic instability.

These effects can work in the other direction too, but with some caveats. A rapid rise in the market would cause volatility sellers to buy the underlying. These purchases would increase underlying values. In the long run, they may lead to less volatility as traders begin to feel safe.

But in the short run, quickly rising volatility might lead to greater volatility if investors buy puts to lock in their gains or buy calls to cover their short call option positions. And the losses that volatility sellers would experience from an increase in the underlying might cause some to buy in their positions, as discussed previously. These two effects might cause volatility to rise further, at least in the short run, even though asset values are increasing. The high volatilities might feed back to asset values through the processes we have discussed, potentially overwhelming the gamma hedging effect and thereby reversing the increased asset values or even causing asset values to fall.

Possible Stabilization Mechanisms

Speculators who short volatility (as opposed to the underlying index options) may stabilize index (e.g., the S&P 500) prices. These speculators sell VIX by shorting VIX futures, buying bullish VIX ETFs and ETNs, and VIX swaps. They also sell VIX when they buy inverse VIX products. Many of these traders hedge with short index positions because the VIX tends to rise when the index falls.

When the index falls, or the VIX rises by a small amount, these traders buy the index to lock-in some profits. These purchases tend to stabilize index values. The trading of these short VIX speculators thus helps explain the low realized volatility observed in the last few years.

Now consider who is on the opposite side of their trades when these traders initially establish their short VIX positions: Their counterparties are long VIX speculators, asset hedgers worried about downside tail risk, or arbitrageurs who hedge in the options markets. If they are arbitrageurs, the ultimate other side is made up of asset insurers who are buying puts.

How do these counterparties respond to a drop in the index? When the index drops and VIX rises, the long VIX speculators sell volatility to realize their gains. The asset hedgers who are long VIX may sell VIX because they think VIX is not likely to rise further. The asset insurers who bought puts eventually sell or exercise those puts.

These transactions would lower VIX. Many of the traders who accommodate these transactions (by buying VIX) would buy the index to hedge their trades, which would be stabilizing. Those buying back puts or buying the underlying in response to a put exercise presumably already would be hedged, so these closing transactions would not have much net impact on the index market.

These observations suggest that short VIX speculation could stabilize the index, at least when index values and volatilities do not change much. However, note that open interest in exchange-traded VIX products is small compared with the assets under management in the other short volatility-contingent strategies. Accordingly, the effect of this stabilization will likely be limited. In the event of a large move, the destabilizing trading of the other short volatility-contingent traders would likely overwhelm the stabilizing trades of these short VIX speculators. To us, the VIX futures ETNs are the tail that can provide the signal for the larger systematic sellers to de-risk at the same time. In making this conclusion, parallels from the “small” subprime market of the global financial crisis that brought large institutions to their knees come to mind.

Corporate stock buybacks provide another stabilization mechanism. Three factors explain the large volume of recent buybacks. First, corporations built a large hoard of cash in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. Second, corporate borrowing rates for many corporations have dropped so that the sum of their dividend yield plus their buyback yield can be greater than the yield on their corporate bonds. Under such conditions, many corporations issue debt to buy back their stock. Finally, the recent tax reform resulted in a one-time cash repatriation that many corporations are using to buy back stock, especially on stock market dips. The continued importance of this stabilization mechanism relies primarily on corporate borrowing rates remaining lower than the total equity yields.

Is the risk of a coordinated volatility unwind now higher than in the past? Although the fundamental nature of markets to oscillate between extremes has not changed, at least three reasons suggest that the systemic risk of volatility delevering has grown. First, the ability of institutional and retail investors to access volatility-selling strategies has never been higher. Second, all market participants can access market information in real time, and they can react in an increasingly continuous trading environment. Finally, levels of

yields and volatility are at unprecedented extremes. They emanate from the same ultimate common factor: the easy policy of central banks globally and low bond yields. This trifecta of mutually self-reinforcing conditions is new and worrisome.

Conclusion

A low-yield, low-volatility environment has drawn market participants with different horizons into essentially similar volatility-contingent strategies based on a common nonlinear volatility risk factor. The growth of these correlated short volatility strategies creates risks that may trigger the next serious market crash. The risk is greater than most would think because most traders are unaware of the extent to which their trading strategies are correlated with those of others who engage in seemingly different strategies.

The stabilizing trades of short speculators in the VIX may partly explain the recent low realized volatility of the market. But assets in these strategies are relatively small compared with assets in volatility-contingent strategies that use the VIX as an input; the latter are many magnitudes larger. It is a case of the VIX tail wagging the asset allocation dog. Whatever the cause of the low realized volatility, it has emboldened traders who trade short volatility-contingent strategies. The expansion of their strategies suggests that an unwind could be quite painful.

Market participants and regulators can benefit from being prepared for large, self-reinforcing technical unwinds that may occur when events cause these traders to reevaluate their risk tolerance. And investors should remember that selling insurance, upside or downside, without reference to the price or the risk inherited can prove to be very expensive indeed. We recommend that investors stress test their strategies under different correlation and volatility assumptions to ensure that the next bout of increased volatility does not force them to liquidate at unfavorable prices.

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