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The greatest strategic blunder of all time?

The recent increasingly severe problems associated with risk aggregation are leading me slowly to the conclusion that we may be seeing the slow play result of perhaps the greatest strategic blunder of all time. I thought you might be interested in what I see playing out.

The empire

To make a strategic blunder that deserves to be counted among the greatest, you have to be in a leadership position. The US is the leader I am referring to, but the blunder is so vast that it is hard to limit it in even this way. We will assume, for the moment, that the US is the most powerful nation on Earth and has been such since at least the 1980s. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the US dollar as the currency of record for the world, the diplomatic position of the US, the incredible military prowess reflected in the first Gulf war, the “smart bomb” technology, global positioning system, the emergence of the Internet in the late 1990s, to my mind, are pretty definitive in terms of world domination.

The Achilles heel

In order to achieve the military success, the US did something with tempo that nobody has ever been able to achieve before. Information and technology became such a force multiplier that the US military and anyone allied with it was able to defeat any organized enemy on the battlefield with almost no casualties on our part and minimal unintended civilian harm. Even the so-called mistakes where innocents were killed occurred almost exclusively because the “enemy” knowingly placed non-combatants in harms way and didn't notify the allied forces of the locations of these civilians. The only space left to fight the US was the terrorist realm, and even that is incredibly problematic in the information age.

The problem was that all of the information sharing required to achieve these incredible results combined with the desire for speed over quality led to highly centralized content and ever-increasing access to enormous volumes of such content by smaller and smaller numbers of people. Today, many if not most entities have central facilities with aggregated risks in excess of the maximum risk threshold placed on any other aspect of the entity. Indeed if you look at it carefully, you will find many or most entities violate their own policies when it comes to information and the technology supporting it.

The blunder

The Office of Personnel Management leak asserted to be of all of the details of adjudication for all of the cleared individuals in that purview seemed to trigger something in me. The process of elicitation is the most fundamental aspect of human intelligence, it is the hardest thing to get right, and the thing with the highest payoff. The release of this data, assuming it is what the media is portraying, implies the potential that no cleared person working for the US government is safe from the widest range of threats by the highest quality attackers with the highest budgets, motivation, capabilities, and intents in the world. To be clear, this is not the blunder, but rather only the most severe instance of its exploitation widely published to date.

Some years ago, we did an assessment of a large organization that had consolidated its data centers into one data center, in a flood zone, at the end of a runway, with only one power path into it. In the same general time frame, we did another assessment for another large entity that had centralized its data centers into a single center only a few years after a major competitor went out of business because their single point of failure data center collapsed in the same way they had just enabled theirs to do. And some years ago in response to the same sorts of consolidation in the US Department of Defense, I pointed out to those in charge (typically generals and admirals) that this was a problem they were creating that was likely to come back and bite them. I did so politely and in public fora by asking simple questions.

Some take our advice and some don't. I'm sure they all have their legitimate reasons. And I have been writing about the hazards of risk aggregation for some time now. But I think it has come to the time to shout it from the highest hills, go to the media, and embarrass people who ignore this issue. The blunder was made long ago and is still being made today again and again. Manning, Snowden, OPM. They are the symptoms. Consolidation, risk aggregation, interdependency, call it what you like. The disease I have now described.

The cure - don't put all your eggs in one basket

When I worked at Sandia, I was taught by my vice president that the way to indicate that people were being stupid ¹ was not to say so in so many words. Rather, the better approach which would not offend them as much (they might not even get it) and would allow others in the room to think better of you while recognizing the issue, was to point out why an idea was stupid and let everyone else come to their own conclusions about it. This has served me well.

However, this hasn't worked in this case. I have pointed out the issues without name calling for many years and things just keep getting worse. So I have taken the conscious decision to start using the term "stupid" – and in particular to ask you, my audience, to help spread the meme about stupid. Repeat after me:

That's stupid – don't put all your eggs in one basket.

To make clear just how stupid this problem and the people who create it again and again are, the problem is as old as the hills. We knew it was a problem in ancient times. Children used to be taught it in grade school or earlier. If you do this thing, you are indeed not as smart of a 5-year old. This is not hard – it is easy. Didn't your mother ever tell you to not put all your eggs in one basket?

Why are we collectively so stupid? As a nation, the US is destroying itself from the inside because we are being stupid. Our leaders are being stupid. The people they lead are being stupid. Anyone who follows them down this path is being stupid. They should all be fired!

Summary:

This is stupid. Don't put all your eggs in one basket! If you do this, you deserve to be called stupid. How could you be so stupid. Didn't your mother ever teach you not to put all your eggs in one basket? Don't be stupid! Spread the word – let's not put all our eggs in one basket!

¹ Stupid := adjective, (1) lacking ordinary quickness and keenness of mind; dull. (2) characterized by or proceeding from mental dullness; foolish; senseless: (3) tediously dull, especially due to lack of meaning or sense; inane; pointless: (4) annoying or irritating; troublesome: (5) in a state of stupor; stupefied: