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When the Risk is Strategically and Operationally Insignificant

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Title: When the Risk is Strategically and Operationally Insignificant

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Abstract: The article discusses some of the dangers in labelling a risk as strategically and operationally insignificant in a security setting.

In a world of finite resources, including finite security resources, labeling a risk as strategically and operationally insignificant can have very significant consequences. Strategic insignificance implies that the risk need not be taken seriously in terms of the long-term major interests of the entity in question—e.g., government, corporation, or airport or other transportation venue. Operational insignificance implies that even successful activities from the perspective of perpetrators of attacks against some entity may not be worth significant assets for countering or prevention. And a problem arises when a risk assessment incorrectly yields a conclusion of strategic and operational insignificance.

An example of incorrect risk assessment may be the November 2003 statement ascribed to a US military commander that the missile shoot-down of a US Chinook helicopter in Iraq and prior attacks against US military personnel were “strategically and operationally insignificant” (Stevenson, 2003). The commander is probably correct in the context of conventional wars of attrition and the short-term, mid-term, or long-term military consequences for the sheer existence of the US.

However, in terms of the war against terrorism declared by the US President, the commander may be incorrect. In this latter war—much more than in conventional wars of attrition—perceptions of the struggle by adversaries and by various observers are often of more significance than body counts. From a terrorist perspective concerning anti-US operations in Iraq since the end of the Saddam Hussein-led administration of Iraq (as of November 2003), effecting an average of one US death per day with crests and troughs of more and less casualties can be perceived as a great ongoing victory. This sense of ongoing victory can be reinforced by the behavioral *schadenfreude* of political actors who also are adversaries, neutrals, and even allies of the US. To misuse an often misused phrase in the context of Islamic terrorism, instead of the US as mountain presenting a formidable logistical problem for erstwhile attackers personified as Mohamed needing to get close enough to the US for attacks, the mountain has come to Mohamed simplifying the latter’s task immensely.

To misperceive strategic and operational significance leads to an acceptance of a certain base rate of damage to one’s human and materiel assets. It also leads to a tolerance for satisficing instead of satisfying requirements to remove a risk. The good news for commercial and general aviation may be that experiencing any loss may be considered intolerable in the context of how the US Government may perceive the interests of its populace and its own interests as well. The bad news may be that with successful attacks on aviation can come habituation to the attacks and then acceptance of a base rate of attacks. The latter could be devastating for the sophistication of security program activity development, employment, and evaluation.

To counter strong allegations of misperceiving risk as neither strategic nor operational significance, a government might assert that neither the war on terrorism nor the quest for aviation security is strategic in nature. But on this, the government sponsoring and coordinating security programs would

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surely be incorrect. (See Johnson, D. D. P., Wrangham, R. W., Rosen, S. P. (2002). Is military incompetence adaptive? An empirical test with risk-taking behaviour in modern warfare. *Evolution & Human Behavior*, 23, 245-264; O'Connor, R. E., Bord, R. J., & Fisher, A. (1998). Rating threat mitigators: Faith in experts, governments and individuals themselves to create a safer world. *Risk Analysis*, 18, 547-556; Post, J. M., Ruby, K. G., & Shaw, E. D. (2002). The radical group in context: 2. Identification of critical elements in the analysis of risk for terrorism by radical group type. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 25, 101-126; Sherman, D. K., & Cohen, G. L. (2002). Accepting threatening information: Self-affirmation and the reduction of defensive biases. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 11, 119-123.)

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