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## WikiLeaks, Media, and Policy: A Question of Super-Empowerment

Adam Elkus and Crispin Burke

Military operations have always been subjected to the effects of disruptive powers far beyond the control of the field commander. From the court intrigues of the past to today's domestic catfights, politics has definitely never stopped at the water's edge. Events such as the recent series of WikiLeaks scandals and *Rolling Stone's* expose on General Stanley McChrystal are evolutionary, rather than revolutionary in nature.

Nevertheless, analysts and pundits have pointed out that modern information technology and media have allowed elements beyond the military's direct control—so-called “super-empowered” individuals—greater opportunities to alter state policy through disruptive actions. However, neither WikiLeaks nor the McChrystal scandal significantly altered war policy. Momentary disruption, no matter how severe, does not matter if the basic policy remains unchanged. Both cases suggest that we ought to have a more tempered view of technology, individual influence, and change.

### The Strategic Corporal and Policy

Despite the stress on the coordinated usage of all instruments of national power and information and narrative seen in many defense and military publications, incidents such as the WikiLeaks “Collateral Murder” Apache gun camera video or *Rolling Stone* journalist Michael Hasting's politically explosive profile of General Stanley McChrystal still seem to shock and surprise. It is bizarre that an institution that stresses adaptability so much would find itself so flummoxed by either WikiLeaks or a magazine journalist—especially since neither are unprecedented.

Fortune and well-placed individuals have always played an important role in military operations. Nor is the idea of the “strategic corporal” limited to the Three-Block War. Freak accidents such as the capture of the original 1940 German campaign plan for the invasion of France have certainly changed the course of history. Robert Doughty, examining platoon and company-level tactics during the thrust across the Meuse noted that the Wehrmacht's strong supply of strategic corporals operating at the point of the spear helped the risky “Sickle Cut” plan succeed.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the WikiLeaks scandals and the *Rolling Stone* article illustrate that more and more individuals removed from the battlefield are attempting to directly influence it. While press

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert A. Doughty, *The Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France*, Hamden: Archon Books, 1990.

coverage, activism, and scandal have been a constant of modern military operations for at least two centuries, many have noted that modern information technology and 24-hour media magnifies the effect of small incidents, pushes greater power to smaller groups and individuals, and creates greater public relations risks for military forces. Media mostly alters—or attempts to alter—policy by influencing public opinion or the opinions and actions of political elites. However, we can also observe limited direct battlefield flowdown effects, like the riots recently provoked by a Florida pastor’s threat to publically burn the Koran.

How should we make sense of this? Clausewitz, as usual, explains it all. As Antulio Echevarria noted, most misunderstand Clausewitz’s famous statement that war is “politics by other means:”

“Clausewitz’s varied use of *Politik* and the context in which he wrote indicate that he signified three things with the term. First, it meant policy, the extension of the will of the state, the decision to pursue goals, political or otherwise. Second, it meant politics as an external state of affairs—strengths and weaknesses imposed by geopolitical position, resources, treaty, etc.—and as a process of internal interaction between key decisionmaking institutions and the personalities of policymakers. Last, it meant a historically causative force, providing an explanatory framework for examining war’s various manifestations over time.”<sup>2</sup>

What this means in practice, Echevarria explains, is that Clausewitz’s multidimensional explanation of politics is “situational and cultural, objective and subjective” encompassing both geopolitical considerations as well as the influence of domestic politics and the “spirit of the age.”<sup>3</sup> One cannot examine the Union’s conduct of the American Civil War, for example, without factoring in Abraham Lincoln’s need to balance the logic of military operations with steps that would bolster his own electoral fortunes and maintain a fragile political coalition.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the popular phrase “politics stops at the water’s edge” and the political epithet that one side is “playing politics” is quite misleading. Perhaps the one-dimensional concept of war implicit in these phrases actively handicaps us when we try to analyze, study, and plan strategic communication.

Of course, actually determining whether or not a given media operation altered policy is difficult to determine in practice. Often times a negative incident could be simply a minor tipping point in a long process of information attrition. It could also play into an ongoing domestic political dispute among policy elites or mesh with some long-burning domestic issue. But it would be short-sighted to claim that media does not have a significant effect on policy and can sometimes substantially undermine it. The debate, as we will explore, is how much (or whether or not) technology and globalization have shifted the disruptive effect centralized media once exclusively enjoyed to individuals.

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<sup>2</sup> Antulio Echevarria II, “War, Politics, and the RMA: The Legacy of Clausewitz,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Winter 1995-1996, 77.

<sup>3</sup> Echevarria II, 78.

<sup>4</sup> Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime*, New York: Free Press, 2002, 229 and James M. McPherson, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief*, New York: Penguin Press, 2008.

## The Concept of the Super-Empowered Individual

We often see the phrase “super-empowered individual” or related concepts in debates over globalization, politics, media, and war. The basic idea is simple: the individual has much more power to create a difference—negative or positive—than he or she did in the near past. Thomas Friedman, who coined the term “super-empowered individual” in 2002, has argued repeatedly that globalization has radically “flattened” the globe, enabling individuals to decisively influence global systems.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Thomas P.M. Barnett introduced the phrase “system perturbation.” This refers to disruption of system function and invalidation of existing rule sets on a national or global scale. According to Barnett, the key requirements to reach super-empowerment are comprehension of a complex system’s connectivity and operation; access to critical network hubs; possession of a force that can be leveraged against the structure of the system; and, of course, a willingness to harness such force.<sup>6</sup>

Former US Marine Corps and Air Force officers T.X. Hammes and John Robb have introduced similar, albeit more military-focused, concepts. Robb’s 2007 book *Brave New War* introduced the concept of “global guerrillas” who leverage economic and industrial bottlenecks to maximize their own power. Similarly, T.X. Hammes has written about the potential of individuals armed with weapons of mass destruction and cutting-edge technologies.<sup>7</sup> General Charles Krulak’s concept of the “strategic corporal” in the Three-Block War also shares some similarities with the super-empowered individual.<sup>8</sup>

Since it is difficult to nail down a common definition of this amorphous concept, we propose that a super-empowered individual is *an individual or small group possessing the knowledge and/or access to critical nodes in complex social systems, and the power and willingness to leverage such to either change the system’s rule set or at least a strong challenge to it*. This clear definition will provide a better basis for evaluating the claims of the literature, both in the political-military world as well as economic and technological contexts.

Unfortunately, there are many problems, both theoretical and practical, with the concept of the super-empowered individual. First, there is a paucity of real-life examples of super-empowered individuals in action, and examples such as the Nigerian guerrilla group Movement for the Emancipation of the Nigerian Delta (MEND) tend to be over-used. The discussion, contingent on

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<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Friedman, *Longitudes and Attitudes: Exploring the World After September 11*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> See Mark Safranki’s discussion of the term in “Who Would Declare War on the World: The Nature of Super-Empowered Individuals,” *Zenpundit*, <http://zenpundit.blogspot.com/2007/07/who-would-declare-war-on-world-nature.html>, and Thomas P.M Barnett, *The Pentagon’s New Map: War and Peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, New York: Penguin, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> John Robb, *Brave New War: The Future of Terrorism and the End of Globalization*, Hoboken: Wiley, 2007 and T.X. Hammes, “Fourth Generation Warfare Evolves, Fifth Emerges,” *Military Review*, May-June, 2007, found at US Army Professional Collection. [http://www.army.mil/professionalwriting/volumes/volume5/july\\_2007/7\\_07\\_1.html](http://www.army.mil/professionalwriting/volumes/volume5/july_2007/7_07_1.html)

<sup>8</sup> Gen Charles Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal and the Three Block War,” *Marines Magazine*, January 1999. [http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic\\_corporal.htm](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm)

many technologies that have not reached maturity yet, is mainly theoretical and future-oriented. Additionally, there is the problem of causation in the explanation of individuals and system effects.

American politics and national security strategy drastically changed after the September 11 attacks, but does that make Osama Bin Laden a super-empowered individual? Surely the outcome depended more on internal American domestic politics, the outcome of which could have led to a variety of possible responses to al-Qaeda's terrorism. Similarly, can we say that al-Qaeda has significantly furthered its agenda? The processes set in motion by al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks led to a set of blows that have nearly destroyed the organization, and relatively few Muslims have heeded al-Qaeda's call to rise up against Middle Eastern rulers. For all of his rhetoric, Bin Laden's harried and bloodied organization hardly appears to be super-empowered.

Another interesting question is whether or not an individual could become accidentally super-empowered. Certainly, one might make the case that Gavrillo Princip, the Serbian nationalist who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, was a super-empowered individual. After other members of the Serbian nationalist group, the Black Hand, made an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the Archduke, Gavrillo Princip serendipitously happened to cross paths with the Archduke's car en route to visit the survivors of the previous attempt. With two bullets, Princip assassinated the Archduke and his wife Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg.

Scholars have advanced a number of different explanations for the origins of World War I, which include the alliance system, the July 1914 crisis itself, great power rivalries, diplomacy, economics, domestic politics, pre-existing war plans and military capabilities, and war fever.<sup>9</sup> But because of the geopolitics of the continent and the nature of the alliance system, one might call the tension between Austria and Serbia a critical node in European diplomacy due to the respective commitments of France, Germany, and Russia. While the arrangements and obligations between major and minor powers were never as static and predetermined as they are portrayed in popular history, they certainly mattered. Princip did not anticipate the chain of events that followed or attempted to cause them, but could it be said that he played a substantial role in altering the rule set of a system due to his access to a pivotal system node? Or, given the sheer complexity of the European geopolitical situation and the multitude of plausible structural explanations advanced in the (now 90 year-old) scholarly debate over the causes of World War I, is this too simplistic an interpretation?

WikiLeaks' information war against the US government as well as Micheal Hastings' *Rolling Stone* profile provide several case studies that also raise similar questions of causation and influence. They also demonstrate that information-empowered non-state actors, while capable of disruption, have great difficulty actually altering policy.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I*, New York: Basic Books, 2008, and Steven E. Miller, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven van Evera (ed), *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

## WikiLeaks' Mouse-Click Insurgency

During 2010, the non-governmental organization (NGO) WikiLeaks dumped a massive amount of classified military information into the public domain. In April, WikiLeaks released gun camera footage from an Apache helicopter which recorded the deaths of two Reuters employees. Additionally, in July, WikiLeaks released a trove of classified field reports from Afghanistan, dubbed the "Afghan War Diary". Though an investigation is undoubtedly underway, it is believed that these secrets were provided by US Army Private First Class Bradley Manning.

Both of these releases caused a tremendous sensation. In particular, the graphic combat video, which WikiLeaks crudely titled "Collateral Murder," gave audiences a disturbing view of the horrors of war. Moreover, the "Afghan War Diary" was marketed as the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of the infamous "Pentagon Papers" of the 1970s. Yet, neither incident caused anything more substantial than a momentary disruption and public relations fiasco. The situation is far from over, as WikiLeaks has threatened to release more damaging information the future. Nevertheless, it is an interesting case study of a non-state actor attempting to directly use technology to alter policy—and WikiLeaks' failure to do so suggests that such actors face serious limitations

What is WikiLeaks' purpose for leaking classified US military information? In a recent *Der Spiegel* interview, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange declared that his objective was to undermine US policy. When asked if he believed that his leaked data would influence decision makers, Assange responded that his material "shines light on the everyday brutality and squalor of war. The archive will change public opinion and it will change the opinion of people in positions of political and diplomatic influence. ...[t]here is a mood to end the war in Afghanistan. This information won't do it alone, but it will shift political will in a significant manner..."<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, Assange declares that the "most dangerous men are those who are in charge of war. And they need to be stopped."<sup>11</sup>

These statements, as well as Assange's TV interviews and writings, are indicative of a classic "have-not" belief system rooted in suspicion of the power of governments and national security agencies. WikiLeaks portrays itself as a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the Pentagon Papers, using the power of information to spur public reaction against individuals and organizations it views as unjust. The United States in particular is distinctly over-represented in recent WikiLeaks leaks, providing further evidence of Assange's animus towards the American government.

John Robb has highlighted a technical paper written by Assange, which has been leaked by WikiLeaks' predecessor Cryptome.<sup>12</sup> In this paper, "State and Terrorist Conspiracies," Assange theorizes that modern governments and large corporations are essentially organized conspiracies that depend on secrecy to carry out their policy aims.<sup>13</sup> He envisions a conspiracy as a closed

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<sup>10</sup> "WikiLeaks Founder on the War Logs," *Der Spiegel*, July 26, 2010. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,druck-708518,00.html>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> See John Robb, "Global Guerrilla: Julian Assange," *Global Guerrillas*, August 15, 2010. <http://globalguerrillas.typepad.com/globalguerrillas/2010/08/global-guerrilla-julian-assange.html>

<sup>13</sup> Julian Assange, "State and Terrorist Conspiracies," November 10 2006, <http://cryptome.org/0002/ja-conspiracies.pdf>.

system that communicates through links of varying strength. Some conspirators are on the periphery; others are central to the plot. The conspiracy as a whole is a living organism that processes external information, circulates it around the conspiratorial group, and then acts on it to produce policy.<sup>14</sup>

Assange, however, sees a way that the conspiracy can be disrupted: “We can marginalise a conspiracy’s ability to act by decreasing total conspiratorial power until it is no longer able to understand, and hence respond effectively to, its environment. We can split the conspiracy, reduce or eliminating important communication between a few high weight links or many low weight links.”<sup>15</sup> Traditionally, Assange writes, this would be done through coercive physical actions such as kidnapping or assassination. But an modern conspiracy can be disrupted by making it incapable of receiving and processing information by “deceiving” or “blinding it.” In practice, this would mean putting pressure on crucial links, or severing links. By doing so, the organism’s very life functions would be disrupted and it would be incapable of comprehending or controlling its environment.<sup>16</sup>

To illustrate, Assange asks his readers to “[c]onsider what would happen if one of these parties gave up their mobile phones, fax and email correspondence — let alone the computer systems which manage their subscribes, donors, budgets, polling, call centres and direct mail campaigns?” Answering his own question, Assange concludes that his opponents would “immediately fall into an organizational stupor and lose to the other.”<sup>17</sup> This paper suggests that WikiLeaks’ operations are not solely intended as a means of influencing public opinion and policy elites. They might also be intended to make civilian and military national security officials and operators feel insecure about their communications, turning up the pressure on the internal dynamics of what Assange views as a closed system ripe for disruption.

WikiLeaks intended to realize these ambitious objectives through the tactical exploitation of information access to relevant leaks. Private First Class Bradley Manning’s contact with WikiLeaks is an example of the organization’s strategy of information access. The “Robin Sage” case also illustrates a method of social engineering that WikiLeaks and other organizations might employ. A vulnerability tester created a fake Facebook profile of a pretty female defense analyst named Robin Sage, friending influential people who shared personal information with her, invited her to conferences, and even encouraged her to apply for jobs.<sup>18</sup> The latter episode also demonstrates the age-old “honey trap” is unlikely to ever go out of style; it’s safe to say that men will think with the wrong portion of their anatomy until the end of time.

WikiLeaks’ grandiose aims, however, are out of step with its means. It grossly overestimates the ability of one small organization to acquire decisive leaks, influence public and elite opinion, and unnerve the Department of Defense— a clumsy but immensely structurally redundant organization. WikiLeaks’ leaks have also not done anything to substantially alter public or elite

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<sup>14</sup> Assange, 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> Assange, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Assange, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Assange, 5-6.

<sup>18</sup> Jaikumar Vijayan, “Fake Femme Fatale Profile Fools Military Intelligence, Security IT Professionals,” *Computer World US*, July 23, 2010. <http://features.techworld.com/security/3232957/fake-femme-fatale-profile-fools-military-intelligence-security-it-professionals/?intcmp=ros-md-acc-p-ft>

opinion about Iraq or Afghanistan or pose a formidable challenge to policy. (It should also be noted that, as this article goes to press, WikiLeaks' top leadership is experiencing immense internal turmoil, largely as a result of the "Afghan War Diary".)<sup>19</sup>

However, the purely *disruptive* effect of WikiLeaks' leaks is undeniable. The 2007 Apache gun camera video dominated the news and briefly spurred heated debate. Additionally, though the "Afghan War Diary" reveals little new about the progress of the Afghanistan War, it does enable Taliban targeting of Afghans who collaborate with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). It could very well have a chilling effect on others considering future cooperation. While WikiLeaks is currently undergoing internal organizational turmoil, future organizations with more efficient methods of information access could conceivably release information with even more of a disruptive effect.

WikiLeaks-type organizations can cull necessary information through efficient and secure exploitation systems and rapidly disseminate images and data to the general public and media. Their distributed systems and decentralized organization also largely insulate them from retaliation—provided that the adversary is a Western state. The Russian mafia, for example, might take a different view of how to deal with WikiLeaks should a leak identify a crucial business practice or give a *MTV Cribs*-style tour of a kingpin's private *dacha*.

### **On the Cover of the *Rolling Stone***

If the WikiLeaks fiasco is a case study of an actor knowingly trying to alter a system through disruptive actions, the McChrystal case shows a more accidental disruption. The personal motivations of the *Rolling Stone* reporter are not clear, but it is doubtful that he started with a plan as elaborate as Assange's. Nevertheless, the crisis created by the McChrystal profile dwarfed the WikiLeaks scandals by several orders of magnitude.

In April 2010, a volcanic eruption in Iceland grounded flights throughout Europe, leaving thousands stranded. Among them was General Stanley McChrystal—the commander of international forces in Afghanistan—and his staff. Delayed in Paris, they decided to make the best of the situation, with the group spending the evening at a local pub. In their company was a reporter from *Rolling Stone* magazine, Matthew Hastings, who had previously covered the war in Iraq. Inexplicably, General McChrystal's staff allowed Hastings to observe the group with their guard down during a raucous evening. Throughout the night, they made a number of off-the-cuff remarks, including derogatory comments about civilian officials involved in the war effort, such as Vice President Joe Biden. The comments from General McChrystal and his staff made their way into an article entitled "The Runaway General."

Events quickly spiraled out of control. Several news organizations received advanced copies of the article on the evening of Monday, June 21<sup>st</sup> 2010, with an apology from General McChrystal following a few hours later. By Tuesday morning, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, news organizations reported that Gen. McChrystal was recalled from Afghanistan by President Obama. By the morning of June

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<sup>19</sup> Poulsen, Kevin and Zetter, Kim. "Unpublished Iraq War Logs Trigger Internal WikiLeaks Revolt". September 27, 2010. <http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2010/09/wikileaks-revolt/>

23<sup>rd</sup>, General McChrystal was relieved of command. The magazine wouldn't even hit the newsstands until two days later, on June 25<sup>th</sup>.<sup>20</sup>

Noah Shachtman of the Brookings Institution believes that “[t]he fact so many of us are networked together enabled the information to spread speed-of-light fast. That turned what might have been a slower-burning flame into an instant conflagration.” Indeed, by the night of June 23<sup>rd</sup>, the word “McChrystal” was one of the top ten topics on Twitter.<sup>21</sup> (On a more personal note, we both use Twitter and watched many of our friends and colleagues consume, retweet, and argue over information related to the McChrystal scandal.)

In an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* published later in June, Shachtman noted that Hastings' story struck a critical node in American public opinion: its underlying anxiety and frustration with the war in Afghanistan, already in its ninth year. Certainly, the “Afghan War Diary”, released by Wikileaks the next month, also played into, and possibly even exacerbated the public's worries about the progress of the war. Moreover, a Gallup poll indicated that support for the war in Afghanistan, already on the wane, had dropped even further after the Afghan War Diary and the incident with General McChrystal.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, the *Rolling Stone* profile did not significantly alter public opinion, policy, or the military's conduct of the war. Indeed, General McChrystal's immediate superior, General David Petraeus, was placed in overall command of forces in Afghanistan. When future histories are written about the Afghan war, will the McChrystal incident be listed as a significant factor in the ultimate outcome? It is likely that, compared to other things such as the September 9, 2001 assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the complex role played by regional states such as Pakistan or India, or the influence of US counterinsurgency doctrine, the McChrystal affair will be little more than a footnote.

One interesting precedent is the tension between Civil War commander General George McClellan and President Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War. McClellan's private letters and diaries contained vituperative criticism of the President and his aides that make the offending quotes from McChrystal's aides seem tame in comparison. He was also not shy about voicing his criticisms to sympathetic newspaper editors and using the media as a conduit for his policy views, but he was never particularly blatant enough about it to give Lincoln an excuse to relieve his command.<sup>23</sup> A McChrystal-style profile would have had the same consequences 150 years ago.

The key difference, however, lies not only in the rapidity of communication but also in the way that the national security blogosphere and media network set up a feedback loop. National security insiders, reporters, and bloggers drove the conversation by constantly debating it and regurgitating whatever scraps of new information came to light. Meanwhile, the 24-hour news

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<sup>20</sup> Noah Schachtman. “Did Twitter Cost McChrystal His Command?” *Danger Room*, June 25, 2010, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2010/06/did-twitter-cost-mcchrystal-his-command/>.

<sup>21</sup> John Timpane, “New Media too Speedy to Outflank,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 24, 2010, [http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/20100624\\_New\\_media\\_too\\_speedy\\_to\\_outflank.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/20100624_New_media_too_speedy_to_outflank.html).

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, “In US, New High of 43% Call Afghanistan War a Mistake,” *Gallup*, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/141716/new-high-call-afghanistan-war-mistake.aspx> Accessed 14 Sept 2010.

<sup>23</sup> McPherson has a good deal of material on the acrimony of this relationship in *Tried by War*.



media and its array of talking heads amplified the disruptive effect by setting up a brief, but intensely gripping drama. While not entirely revolutionary, the dynamics are certainly significant—and can be traced to the pen of one journalist.

## **Conclusion**

While the concept of power increasing to the individual is valid in light of social, political, and economic change, the question is whether or not this shift is significant or decisive. Neither of the recent events profiled in this article show a significant change in policy resulting from the actions of “super-empowered individuals.” However, both the WikiLeaks and McChrystal examples demonstrate there is certainly a disruptive potential.

Large organizations may be tempted to try to crack down on individual usage of technology—such as milblogs or social media forums—in an attempt to prevent future incidents. Excessive measures, however, are unlikely to foil future WikiLeaks or McChrystal-style incidents. Instead, they may stifle lower-level innovation and initiative. The challenge, as always, will be devising competent security and control measures to mitigate the risks without creating yet more unnecessary red tape and bureaucracy.

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