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Principles of Security: Human, Cyber and Biological

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Reported to

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Preface

In developing revolutionary concepts of Naval Warfare,[1–10] the Chief of Naval Operations Strategic Studies Group (SSG) has anticipated concepts that are being now adopted widely. Among these concepts are Network Centric Warfare and FORCEnet. [1, 5, 11] Modern technology enables a new focus on the interactions and relationships of action comprising a network of human beings and technology as central to advantage in military conflict. More significantly, the challenges of 21st century warfare require significantly greater levels of capability for which networks appear to be well suited, and even necessary.

In support of the SSG, Yaneer Bar-Yam, president of the New England Complex Systems Institute (<http://www.necsi.edu>), has provided a fundamental scientific basis using multi-scale representations for analysis of the capabilities of organizations. [12-21] His analysis characterizes the capabilities and limitations of traditional and networked military organizations.

Through periodic lectures at the SSG beginning in January 2000 that have informed SSG reports, and through papers [22–25] addressing specific questions in military force organization and transformation, a basis for understanding is being developed of modern military conflict that enables generalization from experience gained to new and novel military responsibilities.

One of the central insights provided by multiscale representations is that there are distinct types of networks that are relevant to military operations. [12, 24, 25] One of these is a network of agents that are individually capable of action, e.g. warfighters in a battlespace. A second is a network of decision makers that gathers information widely and makes decisions collectively about highly specific actions to perform, where the action is then executed, perhaps by a large and centrally directed force. The former can be considered in analogy to the human immune system where the individual agents are the blood cells that battle harmful agents such as infections within the human body. The second can be considered in analogy to the human neuro-muscular system where the individual agents of the network are the nerve cells whose collective decision making ability far exceeds that of a single cell, and the decision making process results in the actions performed by the muscles.

Distributed networks are particularly needed when facing enemies that are themselves distributed networks—as is apparent in counter terrorism and in cyber security. Both are growing challenges. The attached report focuses on cyber security. Today, cyber exploits—spam, malware, denial of service, and security breaches—are widespread. As cyber space becomes an increasingly integral part of the functioning of all human activities security in this domain becomes an increasingly critical and unmet challenge. This report presents a framework for understanding the inherent limitations of existing cyber security and how to fundamentally improve its capabilities.

Executive Summary

Increasing global interdependence has resulted in distributed human terror networks and cyber security challenges. Actions by and on networks can result in major damage even though individual agents causing it are difficult to locate or identify. Traditional methods of centralized control and local response cannot meet these challenges due to the fundamental constraints on distributed information gathering, detection and coordinated action. Distributed networked security systems are necessary for effective response. Rather than addressing specific challenges of today, the vulnerability caused by global communication and transportation must be met by creating security systems with necessary capabilities to meet a wide range of challenges that are possible in these systems. With traditional approaches to security cyber systems are particularly at risk given the rapidity of action and necessary response.

Security challenges follow certain general patterns. Recognizing the principles of effective security response provides guidance to meeting new high complexity challenges in global terror networks and cyber security. Key principles can be found from analyzing security systems in other domains. In this paper we analyze the biological immune system which is responsible for analogous security problems within human physiology. The immune system has evolved a dispersed distributed-control system that can successfully respond to generic and novel threats and can distinguish threat agents from self and attack threats/invaders with necessary force.

The human immune system consists of billions of cells that coordinate response to security challenges in the human body. The activity of the immune system cannot be understood as a centrally managed process, but rather as arising from a large number of local communications among specialized components to achieve an emergent response. It achieves high success rates, is robust, scalable, flexible, and is generally capable of distinguishing self from non-self in actions. It dynamically refines its ability to detect pathogens by evolutionary selection.

Actions of the immune system can be divided into three layers. The first layer consists of barriers between security domains, including the skin and membranes between compartments of the body. The second layer consists of responses to damage of the system affecting many cells, including repairing barriers and tissues. The third layer, the adaptive immune system, responds to the finest scale challenges, detection and response to cells or molecules distributed through the system. Of particular concern are the viruses and bacteria that can replicate rapidly from a small to large number. All layers of the immune system have analogs in human and cyber security. The most difficult to understand and therefore the focus of our attention is the adaptive immune system.

The central capabilities of the adaptive immune system are detection and action, whose generalized application must be found in any security system. Detection is achieved by

mapping the space of observed structures or behaviors onto a reduced set of possibilities, which are partitioned into threat and non-threat, i.e. non-self and self. When a match is found in the environment to a non-self template, an action is triggered. Detection and action are separated functions of components of the system, requiring careful regulatory interplay between them to enable action without damage to self, corresponding to collateral damage. Specific details of communication protocols and interplay of detection and action agents reveal the strategies the immune system employs in a system wide response whose detection ability increases rapidly in order to eliminate even individual molecular or cellular harmful agents. This requires the ability to replicate and distribute the detection mechanisms and action response rapidly throughout the system. The rapid development of improved response involves progressive refinement of detection by a process corresponding to evolutionary selection, similar to breeding of desired features in agriculture. Improved detection templates developed for a particular threat are distributed throughout the system to enable effective local response.

The relevance of the immune system model to cyber security arose when computer communication systems transitioned from infrequent and low bandwidth processes to increasingly pervasive, persistent and high speed networks. The importance of security is growing as the Internet is used not just as an adjunct to activities for communication about them, but rather as a necessary component of a wide range of economic and social functions. The need for security is apparent in the large impact of spam, spyware, phishing, zombie networks, denial of service attacks, internet fraud, identify theft, and breaches of high security systems. The underlying cause of the need for security is the transition of the Internet connected computers to behavior as a tightly linked system analogous to a multicellular organism.

Existing cyber security systems have parallels to the immune system but these parallels are incomplete. Corresponding to the barriers found in the first level of security are firewalls and separation of distinct networks, e.g. ATM and bank transaction networks where these are separated from the Internet. The second layer of security consists of response to widespread exploits, including Domain Name Server Black Lists (DNSBLs) for blocking spam from their sources. The third layer of security includes virus scanners and e-mail filters that detect malware or spam on an individual computer. Detection makes use of a characterization of programs or e-mail by features (bit strings and logical operations on these bit strings) that provide signatures similar to the detection templates of the immune system. Considering the correspondence with the immune system reveals that the response to detection in cyber security is not pervasive throughout the system.

Our analysis of the immune response identifies the principles of successful response. While there are similarities to the immune system response in cyber security, we find two major gaps in the architecture of the Internet. Without addressing these issues, improved cyber

security will be difficult or impossible to attain. First, there is no mechanism for distribution of a response throughout the system. While individuals can subscribe to security systems that are distributed to some degree, it is optional. Moreover, local information about detection is not redistributed throughout the system. Note that malware does have the capability of replication and distribution. The absence of parallel capabilities in security agents enables attackers an inherent advantage over security efforts. Second, the existing security system is not a collective security system in that it does not protect the Internet but rather protects individual components of the Internet. The ability of any part of the Internet to send messages to any other part of the Internet without encountering security systems implies that weakest elements can be attacked, compromised, or controlled to enable progressively larger infestation of the system. Conversely, the inability to mount a pervasive defense is a fundamental limitation on security which is diametrically counter to the corresponding processes of immune system response. Without a collective security system, the only methods for progress are to harden each element of the Internet, a much larger security burden destined to be ineffective. Specifically, the only means are to improve the security of the operating system on each computer. Even so, computers that are operated by individuals that desire to cause harm would continue to be security risks. The implications of these gaps in the security system are that there is no mechanism within cyberspace for security actions to counter-attack the sources of attacks. Moreover, there is no mechanism for blocking their attacks at point of entry into the Internet rather than at point of attack at another node.

Addressing cyber security would require either or both: (a) Making pervasive distribution of self-propagating but non-destructive security ware acceptable and create a developer community for such security ware. (b) Modifying the protocols of internet routers to accommodate adaptive security software that would regulate internet traffic of other kinds and self-regulate. These modifications would alter the perspective of the "rights" of the Internet, the right of transmission and the right of any node to communicate to any other node of the system. An effective security system requires that this right be limited, as best as possible, to those who do not cause damage to the system.

The analysis of the immune system architecture provides many other principles of security that can be applied to cyber security. Among these principles is a careful interplay of detection and action that includes evolutionary improvement of the detection and response capability. However, any advances in applying such principles will have minimal impact as long as the underlying architectural limitations persist.

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I. OVERVIEW ON SECURITY

The current strategies used in human and cyber security are not capable of handling threats in our increasingly interdependent world. Challenges in human security are changing through global terror networks. Cyber security, by virtue of its rapid and hidden processes is arguably an even greater challenge that is poorly met by existing systems. Severe exploits and massive system burden from actors in cyberspace are common today. Were this extent of malware (viruses, trojans, spyware) and spam found at the human level, it would be considered a major breakdown of a social system.

The demands of addressing current challenges in human and cyber security are motivating the development of fundamentally new approaches. An essential feature of new challenges is their distributed nature. Global transportation and communication systems enable distributed groups of individuals to cause major physical or informational damage, elevating the global challenge of maintaining security at any location. On the one hand, traditional police forces with solely local authority cannot respond to global relationships and associations. On the other hand, the many possible actions of diverse forms can overwhelm centralized responses due to the inability to gather and process information, determine courses of local action, and distribute control messages appropriately. The distributed nature of these challenges demands a distributed, and correspondingly complex, response.[12]

Traditional security revolves around localized agents of various sizes, from individual criminals to national armies. Such agents manifest in the local damage they cause. To combat such agents, the source of the damage must be identified and an appropriate local response mounted. In general, the possible damage is limited to the scope of the agent. Small actions are harder to detect, but are commensurately responsible for less damage. Larger actions responsible for larger-scale damage are easier to observe by virtue of their size. From this perspective, coordinated, distributed actions present a new challenge in that any one of them is difficult to detect, the impact of any one agent may be in a different location, and the collective effect of multiple agents can be large. Moreover, an additional universal aspect of these challenges is their ability to proliferate so that a small scale challenge can grow by recruitment to a large scale over a short period of time.

An essential aspect of distributed, coordinated action is the availability of necessary communication and transportation mechanisms. It is essential to recognize that modern social and technological changes create the opportunities for communication, transportation and recruitment by virtue of the structures that are developed for the functioning of society itself. Changes in global connectivity are driving vulnerability to security challenges that are inherent in the structure of the system.

Recognizing that security challenges stem from changes in social connectivity is important. Otherwise we may be fooled into addressing only specific current challenges, and fail

to meet the next challenge that arises. Solving the current challenge will not eliminate the general vulnerability. Instead, it is necessary to create systems that are able to address challenges of various kinds that surely will arise in the future.

The changes in global communication and transportation systems are easily recognized in the human sphere given the increasing ease and frequency of global transportation and communication among people. However, it is even more dramatic in the cyber space context where changes can be more rapid and the time scale of response may be shorter.

A useful paradigm for the study of distributed response security systems is the biological immune system. The immune system is the biological system responsible for internal security. The analogy between biological attackers and computer attackers is well established in the notion of “computer viruses.”[31] Still, the key to developing effective systems of security is understanding the principles of immune system function so they can be generalized. In this paper, we frame the essential issues to guide a more general approach to using the structure and processes of the immune system to inform distributed human and information technology security. We focus on the part of the immune system designed to address the most complex distributed challenges corresponding to the highly complex distributed challenges in human and cyber security. In this context we detail how the distributed structure and the key interactions between agents enables the remarkable level of success achieved in a demanding security environment. This success is measured by the ability to eliminate to the last one adversaries that are capable of rapid proliferation if left unchecked.

This paper is organized upon the concept that identifying principles from one security system can serve as a foundation for modeling/organizing other security systems with comparable complexity. Understanding principles of security from the immune system is not the same as making an analogy between biological and social or technological systems. Principles embody correspondences that reflect essential logical or mathematical relationships between elements, structures and behaviors. While we do not provide here the formal correspondence, we strive to make the nature of the formal relationships clear in the presentation.

Our primary conclusions are that the existing structure of the Internet does not allow for a security system that is able to address its security challenges. This architectural problem supersedes all specifics, as it is necessary to address the underlying architectural problems in order to enable implementation of effective security.

In order to establish the fundamental gap in the ability of the current security systems we explain the functioning of the biological immune systems solution to its own security problem. We then discuss the mechanisms that have been used to address cyber security, why they fail, and what changes are necessary to enable success.

II. THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

A. Introduction to the immune system

Human beings possess an immune system responsible for the well-being of trillions of cells, itself comprised of billions of interacting pieces, with no single central focus of control. The immune system is a medically significant arena of study, as it provides our defense against diseases, and failures of its operation lead to auto-immune disorders. It also provides an important context for developing our understanding of universal principles that apply across diverse complex systems including social and technological ones.

The immune system can be understood as a system with emergent response. The many components of the immune system function by collectively responding to challenges. The natural scale of its response locally may involve only a few cells, throughout the system it involves many cells responding to potentially distributed challenges in a coordinated fashion. When necessary, the response in any one location can increase dramatically to achieve a macroscopic response as is found in visible infections. Collective actions are distributed among multiple cells, achieving a balance where each cell is important but generally not essential. This emergent behavior cannot be understood by description of individual agents. It must be understood by the coupling of individual cell actions through inter-cellular interaction.

The immune system has properties that are desirable in any security system: first, it is *robust and resilient*, as individual components of the system can be removed without compromising the functionality of the whole. Second, the system is naturally *scalable* without substantial modification. Third, it is *flexible*, often able to cope with pathogens which have never been seen before. Fourth, it displays *specialization*, with different cell types performing the different functions necessary to provide system functionality. Fifth, it is able to distinguish *self from nonself*, even when the molecules it produces during its normal affairs are themselves novel chemical structures.

The immune system exploits the dynamics of evolution to achieve its remarkable success. Evolution is a central process in the formation of any complex system and is fundamentally necessary to achieve success in complex tasks. [12] Evolution enables improvement of a system to face challenges that cannot be anticipated. Understanding how this works is therefore necessary for our ability to address many challenges. In particular, it is important to understand that not only is the immune system itself a product of evolution, but it also applies evolution to address specific immune responses. This latter evolution taking place within a single organism.

B. Immune system architecture

The biological immune system guards against infection in multiple ways, providing a “layered defense” with increasing specificity. Pathogens which penetrate system barriers (*e.g.*, skin) are challenged by the *innate immune system*, and the *adaptive immune system*. These mechanisms are constantly active, meeting a dynamically changing and large set of challenges at all times. Significant illness occurs only when they fail.

The first layer of security consists of the barriers themselves. Barriers distinguish the self from other at the large scale. They separate space to that controlled and not controlled, or subject to different levels of control. The immune system includes the skin and other membranes that separate specific compartments of the body. The skin is the boundary that separates the internal space where the immune system controls the fine scale security, from the space outside the system which is not subject to security.

The second layer of the immune system is designed to meet failures of the first layer. This includes disruptions of the barrier itself, repairing the skin, and responding to challenges that occur when there are significant breaches of the skin. A principle of innate immunity is to characterize damage and threats that are of intermediate scale — involving many cells — and therefore generic features of large classes of hazards rather than specific to the attacker types. These include response to blood loss (clotting) or to tissue damage (inflammation).

The third layer of the immune system addresses the finest scale challenges. In particular, the role of adaptive immunity is to identify specific individual threats that do not trigger the innate immune response: individual molecules, cells or loosely associated groups of molecules or cells distributed through the system.

While there are many potential causes of harm that the immune system guards against, there are two that are of particular note because they are able to self-replicate and thus require a response that both can address a large number of such attackers and yet detect a very small number, even down to a single individual. There are two primary types of such foreign agents: molecular attackers, viruses, and cellular attackers, commonly bacteria but also other replicating single celled organisms.

C. Specific fine scale (adaptive) response

Our focus is on the adaptive immune system whose role is to identify and attack specific intruders or self cells that change behavior to become a threat to survival. Any security system must perform certain key tasks.

1. **Detection.** Hostile elements introduced into the system or arising within the system must be noted, distinguished from non-hostile elements and identified before action can be taken.

2. **Action.** Once a threat has been identified and characterized, a response must be mounted which is appropriate to both the quantity and the nature of the threat.

We now address these points in more detail.

III. ADAPTIVE IMMUNE RESPONSE

A. Identification

The essence of recognizing a threat is distinguishing signatures of its structure or behavior. The identification of a foreign “antigen” in the immune system is analogous to distinguishing undesirable from desirable elements in any system. While this is a commonly necessary task, this form of pattern recognition is fundamentally difficult. Understanding how it is accomplished is key to the design of any security system.

Central to identification is a way to map any structure or behavior that is to be characterized onto a smaller and better defined set of “possibilities.” This set of possibilities is then partitioned, perhaps dynamically, into a set that are considered a threat and those that are not a threat.

The immune system performs this distinction by starting from a large set of prototypes within the space of possibilities, and rejects from this set those that are matches to components of self. The remaining set are used for identification of antigens. Also, perhaps, damage caused may be used as evidence. When an antigen is detected, action is initiated, and the prototypes are refined by evolutionary processes to achieve better matching, and thus more rapid response.

B. Capacity for action

The identification of the presence of a threat must trigger a response that will be effective in meeting that threat. The response could be of various kinds, but it must modify to render harmless, or eliminate the threat from the system.

In a distributed system, such as the immune system, an appropriate level of response must be recruited from nearby or from far away depending on the size of the response needed. Once the existence of a threat has been identified, the ongoing need for detection should be simplified for the responding agents. This enables action to be performed by components that are not as capable of performing differentiation by themselves, but are instead specialized for action against a threat.

The existence of responders who are then less capable of discrimination, however, increases the likelihood of actions that are against self rather than against threats. This

challenge must be met by careful regulatory processes for triggering action. The need to identify threats, and then selectively trigger action requires balanced protocols to safeguard self while defeating threats. Examples of this issue in human security include the problems of “friendly fire” and “collateral damage,” in warfare, which constitute harm to responders and to bystanders respectively. While these terms imply unintended harm, we can also include in this category intentional actions by individual agents that are not consistent with collective goals, such as war crimes. There are two types of methods for avoiding self-damage, the first are within an individual agent, analogous to intention of the individual, and the second involve regulatory interactions between agents at the time of action.

In computer security, similar issues of self-inflicted damage today include issues of “false positives” such as the blocking of desired e-mails as spam, or blocking of legitimate users from accessing a system. The extra effort involved in forgotten or mistyped passwords and password systems can be included as well.

Multiple types of cell and multiple cells of each type are involved in each action of the immune system. Biological and biochemical details will be discussed in the Appendix; for the moment, we note that the ability to spread messages and agents throughout the body via the circulatory system allows initial signals to provoke a systemic reaction to resolve a challenge. This systemic reaction is not just a call for others to respond to a particular place, but a pervasive distribution throughout the system of the ability to respond to attackers that can appear in a distributed fashion and replicate.

C. Evolution as method

The central principle of evolution is the “non-random survival of randomly varying replicators.” [27, 28] In each generation, the replicators which are better able to survive are able to leave more offspring, and so advantageous traits can spread throughout the population. If the environment changes, the mixture of traits within the population will change in response; populations which cannot adapt in this fashion will quite generally be supplanted by those who can. We emphasize that the variation that takes place in the traits through, e.g. mutations, is random, while the selection which acts upon replicators has a much more deterministic character.

Selection creates a functionality in the replicators over time, where that functionality can be defined by the ability to meet the criteria of selection. By arranging criteria of selection to serve a particular purpose, the evolutionary process can serve to induce that purpose in the replicators.

Such a directed evolutionary process has been variously used both historically and today. The breeding of animals is an artificial way of applying selection criteria to serve a purpose that human beings determine.[26] In technological applications, so called genetic or

evolutionary algorithms,[29] specify an artificial measure of “fitness” of a computer-based replicator and apply random variation and selection to improve the replicators in meeting that measure. In this context the process of evolution can be considered a form of optimization. Still, computer based evolutionary processes only incorporate some features of the evolutionary process in nature.[12]

If the goal of a system is relatively easy to specify but the path to achieve that goal is unclear, then a properly implemented evolutionary process is an approach that can be effective.

The process of evolution is used by the immune system to improve the most information intensive aspect of the response process, detection. This process requires effective use of the existence of some detection to initiate the improvement process so that progressive improvement of detection is possible. Subsequently, improved detection accelerates the ability of the system to respond. This requires rapid distribution of the improved capabilities throughout the system through global dissemination.

IV. THE CYBER SECURITY CHALLENGE

When early “mainframe” computers were replaced by personal computers, an individual computer still remained largely isolated, interacting with its owner. Programs or data were transferred via floppy disk or, sometimes, over telephone lines. As networking became ubiquitous, the rate of ongoing interactions created a global system in which most of the communications are not observed directly by human beings and individual human response times are insufficient to monitor the dynamics of the communications. Moreover, the extent and rate of communication continues to grow.

The widespread use of the Internet for communication and commerce has increased the need for cyber security.[30] It is important to recognize the change from a system that is an adjunct and a convenient substitute to more conventional communications, to when such interactions are an integral part of society. As commerce is increasingly done through the Internet, the disruption of economic activity through the disruption of such communications becomes increasingly important. The next stage of development, already occurring in many contexts, is the integration of the Internet into response systems. Thus the operation of almost every organization is undergoing a transition from isolated computer stations, to communications, to real time interactions, to integrating essential responses through the network. Increasingly, individual actions require information from multiple sources distributed through the network, and actions themselves become distributed among multiple individuals interacting through the network. Potential disruptions of the network system increase in impact as this occurs.

For example, computers introduced into medical operations might first be used for track-

ing appointments and keeping financial records. Then they might be used for sending prescriptions from physician to pharmacy. Third, they can be used for real time monitoring of procedures. Finally, they can be used for remote controlling of procedures. Once the final stage is reached, the disruption of service has real time impacts not only on the communication about the procedure but the procedure itself.

The need for security has become apparent in the success of Internet fraud, including breaches of high security systems and theft of personal records. The extent and variety of “cyber” actions has increased with the ubiquity of spam, spyware, phishing, zombie networks, denial of service attacks, etc. A spam-blocking service reports over 4.7 billion spam messages intercepted since November 2005, almost ten times the amount of legitimate traffic over that period.[56] This includes only the spam which was intercepted. Many of the spam messages advertise fraudulent products or otherwise attempt to defraud their readers; they contain links to unlawful sites—which also serves to skew search engines like Google in their favor; and they often originate from otherwise legitimate computers whose security has been compromised.

The need for the biological immune system arose when single celled organisms evolved to form multicellular organisms. As with the change in human social and cyber connectivity, the connectivity in multicellular organisms leads to a collective vulnerability and a need for a system to guard against it.

V. CURRENT CYBER SECURITY

There are a number of generally used cyber security systems that are parallel in some way to the immune system operations. In addition, there are specific efforts to adapt concepts from the immune system for cyber security.[32–35, 39]

A. Layered defense

The first layer consisting of barriers in cyber security includes firewalls and the separation of distinct networks for e.g. ATMs and bank transactions. These security systems prevent malware from entering a system as skin protects an organism. Barriers within a system, just as membranes within the body, generally are semi-permeable, using mechanisms to differentiate what can pass. In cyber security these include password authentication and S/Key challenges.

The second layer of cyber security includes detection of exploits and generic responses to them. This includes Domain Name Server Black Lists (DNSBL) often called RBLs (Real-time Blackhole Lists). These are services that gather and provide lists of IPs that are sources of spam and other malware. Institutional mail servers can automatically implement policies

that use this information to block domains of the Internet that are sources of spam. The sources of spam may include servers set up for this purpose, or zombies which are computers that have been compromised by malware so that they transmit spam and malware on behalf of others. In effect, zombies are the analog of virus infected cells that become factories for viruses and other pathogens. The large number of these exploits today results in a response which is akin to a generic immunity response.

The third layer of cyber security includes virus scanners and e-mail filters are the analogs of the adaptive immune system.[32] These applications search programs stored on disk or incoming e-mail messages for signatures of malware and spam. If the detection system is not specific enough, programs that are valid, and e-mail that is valid are rejected. Alternatively, malware or spam may not be rejected. The desired versus undesired categories are analogous to the discrimination of “self” from “other” in the adaptive immune system. Where self consists of legitimate software and desired e-mail, and other is the malware (virus, Trojan Horse, etc.) which would compromise the system and spam. The existence of false-positives and false-negatives that misidentify whether the spam or malware are legitimate is similar to errors of classification in the immune system as well.

B. Detection

A computer immune system must detect both known and hitherto unknown viruses or spam. For this purpose a program fragment, or small piece of data from a larger set can be used as a detection template. This extracted data can be compared with correspondingly extracted data from a virus or spam. The latter is known as the “signature” of the virus or spam. Finding the “signature” within a piece of software indicates that the software has been infected. Various signatures can be constructed based upon procedures specified by individuals (heuristic rules), or statistical pattern detection (Bayesian filtering), and collaborative identification (when voluntary human communities manually specify spam signatures that are shared).[58]

Some detection systems are local in that the software itself learns from labeling by the user what is spam and what isn't. In this case the user manually identifies spam and non-spam, and signatures are extracted automatically that differentiate between the spam and non-spam by the software.[59] Others are centrally directed by service providers who provide the software and revise it to add templates for new malware.[60–62] Revisions arise after reports due to the detection of the virus. Such detection occurs when individuals observe activity of processes on computers outside of normal operations, or of damage due to such processes.

Similar issues arise at the level of computer network operation security.[39] Such security systems operate at the level of the pattern of traffic rather than the content of individual

messages. To detect a deviant computer system that may be the source of other attacks, a pattern detection system has a representation of the types of patterns that can arise. Among these a set of “self-patterns” is created, representing the legitimate ways in which traffic can flow amongst the computers of a Local Area Network (LAN). Abnormal traffic, such as a computer suddenly sending thousands of e-mail messages to the external Internet, is a “non-self pattern” and is considered a sign of infection (in this example, the computer may have been co-opted by a spammer and used as a “zombie” to spread spam and malware).[37, 38]

VI. WHY CURRENT CYBERSECURITY CANNOT WORK

The examples of Internet based security suggest that existing systems have some similarities with immune system operations. Still, they do not capture the dynamics of communication and interplay of detection and action that should provide better security and better self-protection. These limitations include the manner of detection and sharing of signatures of malware (local, centralized and limited distribution systems), as well as the limits in implementing actions to prevent or stop attacks and exploits.

Indeed, while cyber security systems today provide some protection for malware and spam, the ongoing presence of large volumes of spam and malware, and exploits, suggests that the existing protections are too limited in their abilities and greater attention to the principles of security as embedded in immune system operations would give rise to improved outcomes.

There are two fundamental reasons that the current approaches to cybersecurity cannot work effectively.

First: There is no mechanism for rapid pervasive distribution of security processes that can respond to new types of malware or spam. The voluntary use of community or centrally generated malware or spam signatures, while widespread, is not pervasive. One way to understand the ineffectiveness of security distribution is to compare the distribution of security with that of malware. Malware is much more pervasively and rapidly distributed than the security that is designed to guard against it. In the immune system, viruses can be considered to be analogs of antibodies. Both are able to replicate rapidly using cellular mechanisms and both are able to attack cells or other molecules. This correspondence makes viruses and antibodies have similar capabilities. Furthermore, T-cells are similar to bacteria in their ability to replicate and attack other cells. This correspondence of defenders and attackers implies that there are no major gaps in the capabilities of the attackers as compared to the defenders. By contrast, there is no defensive analog of malware, in that the anti-malware software is centrally controlled instead of being distributed in origin. A better correspondence would be a security system that would operate on the basis of a peer-to-peer protocol. As computer viruses and other malware develop, so would defenders that would

be redistributed automatically across the web. Such a peer-to-peer system would open the door to more opportunities for malware, but this architecture would give attackers and defenders equal capabilities, unlike the current situation where attackers have a wider range of options, with potentially much greater capabilities.

The closest system to the architecture of the immune system from this perspective is an existing distributed collective response system where multiple users share signatures of spam. [63, 64] Still, unless these systems are universally adopted, they do not prevent widespread infection and thus widespread attack — i.e. they are not collective security systems but rather localized security systems.

Second: The current architecture of the Internet is based upon a protocol (IP [65, 66]) that transmits messages independent of their content. The basic premise is that any valid message is delivered to its destination. The delivery process involves transfer from the point of origin through a sequence of nodes (routers) of the internet. Each router reads the target destination specified by the message (packet) identifies a node to transfer the message to that will enable eventual delivery to the destination, and transfers it. In this process, there is no evaluation of what the message contains. Individual messages may be lost in transmission due to network overload, but not due to evaluation of the contents of the message. This implies that as far as the sender and receiver are concerned the network is transparent. Any message is transferred from one node of the network to any other node of the network without intervention. In considering the transfer of messages, it is important to recognize that a message is also an action that can be harmful. If we consider each destination node of the network to be like a “home,” and the network to be like the streets, then from the point of view of security, this is equivalent to having no police on the streets or military at the borders. Each household, or individual, must defend him or herself, using means of protection (e.g. guns, etc.) purchased on the market. That the protection is left to the individual home reflects the open nature of the Internet. The corresponding system in a biological sense would enable any cell to approach and attack any other cell of the body. Under these untenable conditions there would be no collective security in the medium in which cells are located. Analogously, there is no protection in the medium of the Internet.

The two fundamental limitations of the architecture of the Internet from a security perspective imply that there is no mechanism for a security system to prevent actions consisting of nodes attacking other nodes in the Internet. Attacks that are launched cannot be stopped before they arrive at their destination. There is also no process that enables removal or elimination of the originators of an attack. Security systems do not have access to nodes of the Internet except as they voluntarily participate in security actions by subscribing to security communities or services. Thus, preventive action or removal is only possible if the originating node voluntarily participates in a security action. Without such participation, the best that can be done is to protect from attack at its destination. This implies that an inten-

tional attacker can gain strength and evolve increasingly sophisticated attacks. Attacks can be focused on particular nodes, either because of their vulnerability or value. In contrast, to be effective, security must defend all parts of the system it wishes to protect.

In order to develop an effective collective security system similar to the immune or human security systems, substantial architectural changes must be implemented. Collective security preventing attacks would require that the routers of the Internet themselves would need to have protocols that allow refusal of transmission based upon content or extrinsic information such as point of origin. The routers of the Internet serve as the transmission medium for the nodes of the Internet. This corresponds to the intercellular fluids, including the blood, of physiological systems, the primary locus of immune system activity. Such an approach was implemented against spam transmission early in the history of DNSRBLs [67], however, it appears to be abandoned. A router based security system would curtail the “right of transmission,” which may be considered fundamental in discussions of Freedom of speech. [68]

Absent a router based security system, the second alternative is to enable automatic transmission of security software among all terminal (non-router) nodes of the internet. This would enable rapid and pervasive distribution throughout the system. This is a similar propagation to that of viruses and other malware. Such automated transmission might be considered to be less desirable than router based security, as it involves partial loss of control by owners of the activities on their computers in favor of security operations. Corresponding software capabilities exist in peer-to-peer systems, and in existing voluntary security communities.

Thus far we have not discussed the use of human legal systems to pursue human originators of malware and spam. In this regard there are difficulties inherent in international law for pursuing such attacks as crime. Perhaps more critically, the different domains and time scales of Internet activity and human legal activity suggest that this approach will be difficult to utilize to any significant effect. Criminal prosecution is a high cost and time effort that can be effective in disrupting non-normative activities but not in curtailing widespread actions. Indeed, the existing success in prosecuting Internet crime is limited. [69, 70]

VII. CONCLUSIONS

We performed an analysis of principles of security using the immune system as a model that provides insight into the functioning of any security system. We identified central functional attributes of a security system. However, we found that these properties cannot be effectively implemented in cyber security because of current limitations of the Internet structure. This is not a limitation of the security principles but rather of the architecture of the Internet.

Within the current limitations on security systems, security is largely in the hands of individual nodes. Improving the resistance of individual nodes to attack is critical because a compromised node will be the source of attacks on other nodes. The main source of weakness in the system is the vulnerability of operating systems on individual computers. Vulnerable operating systems should be avoided not just for the security of the individual node but for the security of the system as a whole.

A focus on individual nodes, however, will miss the essential nature of a collective system and its vulnerabilities that arise due to the rapid communication. We therefore recommend that major modifications will be considered that allow the ability to perform security within the router systems of the Internet rather than in the end nodes. This would entail router protocols that can be used to reject messages based upon content, with distributed detection systems to identify which content corresponds to harmful acts. Such a security system must be carefully designed to avoid harm to self through blocking valid Internet traffic. Indeed, it is the fear of such blocking that has limited the implementation of such a system. The use of principles of security obtained from analysis of other security systems, specifically the immune system, can provide guidance to enable effective processes that minimally impede or interfere with valid traffic. To this end we summarize our findings of immune system security.

We found that the three subsystems of the immune system are designed to address challenges at three scales. The largest scale is the separation of internal and external domains, i.e. the skin, as well as other partitions of the system by membranes to separate different security domains. The intermediate scale corresponds to manifest system damage, including damage to the boundaries or tissues, that require repair. The finest scale and highest complexity system involves responding to distributed collections of molecules or cells that are difficult to identify in the context of the complex physiology of the body, and are often able to replicate to create larger scale damage, e.g. viruses and bacteria.

The most specific and distributed system for security involves remarkable level of emphasis on detection. Detection can be described in a general fashion that is relevant to security systems at other levels of organization including human societal, and cyber security. Detection involves a standard set of templates that are able to characterize sufficiently broadly potential invaders, but have specificity sufficient to distinguish adversaries from self. Once detection occurs, multiple processes are used to enhance the ability to detect the adversaries rapidly and in small numbers.

The detection process is intimately linked to action even though different agents perform detection and action. The interaction of action agents and detection agents is a local process involving identifying individual elements as adversaries and mounting a proportionate response. These local interactions are carefully designed to avoid self-inflicted damage.

All of the immune system actions utilize widespread communication and transportation to

transport the detection mechanisms throughout the system, to recruit additional defenders, and to communicate ongoing improvements in detection.

A review of the current major systems for cyber security suggests that there are aspects of cyber security systems that correspond to the immune system. However, the fundamental differences in architecture prevent communication and refinement of responses to adversaries throughout the system. These constraints also severely limit the possible counter attacks, including the ability to block sources of attacks at the points of origin. With such limitations overall success in suppressing the large numbers of cyber attacks will be limited. Since the transportation and communication systems can be exploited by attackers to achieve widespread damage, they must also be used as part of successful response by defenders.

VIII. APPENDIX: DETECTION AND RESPONSE IN THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

In this appendix we provide details about the immune system response to identify the mechanisms by which it provides a capacity for detection and for corrective action. These are key aspects of immune system response but are generally not currently applicable to cyber security because of the inherent architecture of the Internet. As explained in the main paper, should the structure of the Internet be modified in a manner to allow for improved security, these mechanisms can provide improved guidance for how to proceed.

The adaptive immune system has a high degree of specificity: a “non-self” antigen (a signature of an adversary) is recognized and responses are tailored to that particular pathogen (adversary). We will show how the biological system identifies adversary signatures, transmits information to agents who can take action, determines which actions are appropriate, and how memory functions.

The cells of the adaptive immune system are known as lymphocytes, which are special types of white blood cells (*leukocytes*). The two principal categories of lymphocyte, are *B cells* and *T cells*, are further divided into subcategories as explained below. Both derive from stem cells found in bone marrow, the *hematopoietic* or blood-producing cells.[42]

B-cells have a primary role in identification of adversaries, and T-cells are the primary agents of action in response to the adversaries. The tight coupling of identification and action results in mutual regulation of activity by B and T cells. When detection occurs, B-cells trigger T-cell response, and T-cells increase the action of B-cells to accelerate detection as necessary.

A. Detection mechanism

Detection starts with pattern matching between a detection template and entities in the environment that might be characterized as adversaries. One type of cell, B-cells, and one type of molecule, antibodies, are the biological agents primarily responsible for detection of threats.

The primary template in the adaptive immune system is the antibody. The antibody is a molecule that binds to anything whose shape matches (complements) the antibody binding site. Antibodies can be found in two primary forms. First, as part of a cell where it is attached on the surface membrane of a cell to the cell signaling system so that a match between the antibody and something in the environment triggers a cell response. Second, antibodies can be released into the blood and when floating around attach themselves to matching entities.

The key to the use of the antibody as a pattern matching template is the possibility of generating many different shapes of the molecule binding site. This ability arises because

the antibody is formed of several parts, the parts can be combined together in flexible ways, and the parts themselves can be varied. An antibody is comprised of four peptide chains arranged to form a Y-shape. Each of the Y-shape’s two “arms” has a variable region.[43]

The matching between an antibody through binding to another molecule (called an antigen) occurs at the molecular level: the shape of an antibody is complementary to that of the antigen to which it binds. More precisely, it will bind to a part of the antigen called the *epitope*, typically about 600 \AA^2 in area.[44]

Antibodies are generated internally by B-cells. The mechanisms for their manufacture are through the read-out of genetic templates for each of the components and their combination into a single molecule. B-cells also are designed to carry the antibodies they generate on surface membrane receptors as a detection mode. When the antibody binds to something in the environment the B-cell can change its behavior accordingly.

A B-cell identifies a threat when the antibodies present on its surface bind to a specific foreign antigen.[45] B-cells that have identified an adversary by binding to it perform a series of actions to improve future detection of similar adversaries and initiate response. The actions they take to initiate response will be discussed in the next section.

B. Detection templates

B cells determine which templates to use for detection of invaders through a process which requires multiple steps, each of which is central to the functioning of the immune system.

The first step is that multiple templates can be generated by cellular mechanisms. By recombining genetic elements from a “toolbox” of short sequences, a large volume in the shape space of all possible antigens can be covered.

The second is the process of generating the set of templates that are found in the body as B cells are formed, mostly in bone marrow. B cells are produced from a type of stem cell. They progress through several developmental stages marked by changes in the genetic sequences which define the active sites of their antibody molecules. This variation during their development gives rise to a remarkable diversity of templates associated with distinct B-cells. This large array of prototype templates don’t exhaustively cover the set of possibilities, but are widely dispersed throughout the set of possibilities.

The third is eliminating templates that correspond to self molecules. Mounting an immune response to the body’s own molecules and cells is extremely undesirable. The body avoids this (not always perfectly) by inactivating lymphocytes which happen to be self-reactive after they are generated. During the last stages of their maturation, B cells are presented with self molecules. B cells which react to these molecules are triggered into programmed cell death (apoptosis) or modifying their receptors. [43] This process occurs in part after developing B cells move to the spleen, where they complete their maturation

process.

The fourth is enhancing the presence of B-cells whose antibodies have responded in the past to antigens. This serves as a form of memory. Cells that have not been exposed to antigen develop into different forms once they have encountered their target antigen. Some become *effector cells*, which go on to play an active role in immune response; others become *memory cells*, which do not immediately participate in anti-pathogen defense but are sensitized to an antigen so that a second encounter will stimulate them to become effector cells. Over the short term their stimulation by antigens that are present in the current attack contributes to the strength of the response. Memory cells are much longer-lived than effector cells, persisting sometimes until the death of the animal instead of dying within days, so they can facilitate rapid immune responses to threats which have been encountered before.

The fifth is the enhancement of templates matching to current invaders by the process of evolution, discussed in the next section.

The sixth is the communication between B-cells that enables multiple distinct antibodies to be formed to the same adversary. This is discussed below in the section on B-cell to B-cell communications.

The seventh is the use of indicators of cellular damage that may reduce the threshold for detection or trigger it. [50]

C. Evolution of detection

When a body is attacked by a reproducing agent, such as a virus or a bacterium, the rate of detection of that invader is critical to the success of the response. Detection of even individual ones is necessary before they can reproduce, requiring remarkably fast and pervasive detection. The detection can be enhanced if the detection template is improved to be a better match to the invader. This is accomplished by a process of progressive improvement through selecting improved versions, i.e. evolution.

The evolutionary process occurs primarily in specific organs of the body called lymph nodes. [51] When B-cells detect an invader with their antibodies, they take the piece of the invader that binds to the antibody. They travel to a lymph node and place the antigen in the wall of the lymph node. B-cells reproduce very rapidly in a lymph node. In doing so they vary by high rates of mutation their own DNA which codes for the antibody they produce. They use their antibody to test its binding to the antigens in the wall of the lymph node. The less successful ones rapidly die by programmed cell death. The ones that are most successful, i.e. the best detectors, are sent out into the blood stream to engage with the adversary.

As B-cells bring pieces of the invaders into the lymph nodes, and the process of selecting

improved binders continues, the B-cells released back into the blood stream are continually improved in their ability to detect the invader. This leads to a dramatic change in the sensitivity of the immune system to that invader, enabling the system to completely eliminate the invader.

D. B-cell to B-cell communication: Improving detection

Once an adversary has been detected, identifying multiple ways to detect it both increases the ability of detection and reduces the possibility of an adversary acting to avoid detection by modifying their structure and behavior.

B cells that have identified an invader by binding to it, use this detection to enhance the ability of other cells to identify the invader. The method for doing this is to make less specific parts of the invader to which other B-cells may be able to bind. The B-cell breaks parts of the invader into smaller components and displays these components on the B-cell surface. Other B-cells then bind to these molecules triggering their own response systems. This creates additional methods for invader detection in addition to the original one detected by the first B-cell.

Since adversaries are not individual molecules or cells, but rather are replicating viruses and bacteria, the immune system utilizes massive parallelism: many types of pattern detection templates (antibodies) can be tested simultaneously across the system. This enables using multiple methods to detect the same type of adversary.

The communication by B-cells to other B-cells in this way is a key form of cooperation between cells of the adaptive immune system. The network of interactions also includes communication from B-cells to T-cells, and reciprocally from T-cells to B-cells.

E. B-cell to T-cell communication and intelligence

Cell to cell communication enables B-cells to communicate the discovery of antibodies to the cells responsible for action — T-cells. Cell to cell communication is also important for information gathering by T-cells from non-immune cells — the analog of human intelligence.

T-cells use a particular “secure” communication channel to receive messages from B-cells and other cells of the body. The security of the communication is provided by MHC molecules. These are a diverse set of molecules that are highly specific to each individual. The specific nature of these molecules is maintained by high genetic variability of the MHC molecules over evolutionary time and within the human population at any one time. Secure communications are important to prevent invaders from “spoofing” messages to the T-cells.

When a B-cell communicates to T-cells, the “information,” is in the form of a molecular fragment on the surface of the B-cell bound to a MHC molecule. T-cells have the ability to

bind to and recognize the MHC molecule and the molecular fragment that is bound to it.

As described before, a B cells whose antibodies bind to something in the environment (the antigen) takes the antigen/antibody complex and breaks it into small units, which are returned to the surface. At the surface the fragments are combined with a MHC molecule. The surface display of the MHC with the parts of the antigen/antibody complex are then detected by T-cells in the vicinity triggering T-cell action.

Similarly, any cell of the body may display MHC molecules with fragments of molecules that are found inside the cell. This enables T-cells to check for normalcy or cell infection (e.g. by viruses) from the surface display on a cell.

F. Action agents: T-cells and phagocytes

The primary agents responsible for action against threats in the immune system are T cells. T cells both secrete molecular messengers which can kill other cells or can increase the growth rate of other cells.

T cells can secrete cytotoxins which can kill other cells. T cells target foreign cells or self cells that have been infected by foreign agents such as viruses. T-cells action is triggered by their binding to complexes of antibody and MHC molecule, i.e. they are triggered to action by B-cell signaling.

T cells also are responsible for signaling B-cells into a more active state. This active state results in two effects. The first is rapid growth and proliferation. The second is the manufacturing of more antibodies and their release into the blood and other intercellular fluids so that they bind to antigens throughout the system and not just when a B-cell encounters them. This is a process that makes the detection itself a form of action. The binding of the antibodies can disable the pathogens directly or mark them for destruction. The former is accomplished by interfering with the surface molecules which pathogens use to infect cells or by binding to the toxins produced by bacteria.

The two different functions of T cells are divided between killer T cells and helper T cells. The dynamics of killer and helper T-cell response is regulated in part by their responsiveness to distinct MHC molecules.

Finally, a method is necessary to clean up both the dead cells and molecules, and even live but marked cells, from the system. This is accomplished by phagocytes. Phagocytes, are cells that can engulf and use digestive juices to, in effect, eat other cells and molecules. Their action is triggered by the presence of the antibodies bound to molecules and cells after their release by B-cells. [43]

G. Post response: Reducing the cohort and memory

The rapid growth of the number of B-cells, antigens and T-cells in response to an adversary also requires a mechanism to reduce that number when the response is successful. As the number of antigens declines, the short lifespan of the B-cells and the absence of triggers to produce additional ones leads to their decline. Additional triggers to accelerate this process may also take place but must be carefully designed to avoid exploitation.

The immune system is costly, in that providing an immunological defense against foreign pathogens requires resources — such as energy and nutrients — which are also needed for muscular and neural activities, reproduction, growth and other biological processes.[40]

Still, once a specific threat has been identified, it is more likely to reappear. This justifies retention of identification templates, in antigen and B-cell form, for future use. This retention accelerates the response when the same threat reappears.

Some B-cells preserve the memory of prior responses by continuing to survive for extended periods of time after a response. Since some death is unavoidable, they also replicate without mutation to preserve their antibodies in their offspring. These “Memory cells” maintain the capacity to generate their specialized responses, so that a later infection by the same pathogen can be countered quickly.

Organisms without an adaptive immune system lack such immunological memory, whereby a pathogen can be “remembered” by its signature antigens.

H. Security failures

The immune system, like other systems, has modes of failure that demonstrate how its processes work and fail to work in addressing key challenges.

The first type of failure is when an invading organism cannot be overcome by the immune system. Bacteria are significant challenges to the immune system, and before antibiotics were available many people died due to failure of the immune system to respond sufficiently effectively to bacterial diseases. Such failures reflect the tight competitive balance between bacterial attackers and immune system response. When the immune system is weakened due to lack of nutrition, compound diseases or particularly effective pathogenic attackers the immune system response may not be sufficient to prevent growth and replication of the bacteria.

The second type of failure is auto-immune disease. This is a failure to distinguish self from non-self which causes the immune system to attack self cells. This is most common for the case of some special types of cells, such as insulin-producing cells. It is believed that the small number of such cells leads to their vulnerability as the immune system may not sufficiently be exposed to these cells and therefore is more likely to identify them as “other”

and attack them, thereby giving rise to some types of diabetes.[54]

The significance of both of these failure modes for other forms of security is that even with the best system possible, success is not guaranteed.

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