Permission Drift in Agentic Systems: A Runtime Control-Plane Synthesis

Exzil Calanza

Independent Researcher, Iloilo City, Philippines

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ABSTRACT This technical synthesis analyzes permission drift: the gap between an agent demonstrating capability in evaluation and remaining authorized to exercise that capability in production. The source article motivates a runtime control plane combining dynamic capability scoping, policy evaluation, trace-level observability, and dry-run or approval gates between model decision and external action. The paper distinguishes evaluation of capability from authorization at execution time and treats the proposed control plane as an engineering design that requires broader multi-tenant and cross-tool validation.

INDEX TERMS ¢â‚¬â€ permission drift; agent governance; control plane; capability scoping; policy enforcement; runtime guardrails

I. INTRODUCTION

STUDY TYPE: Technical synthesis. **RESEARCH QUESTION:** How can runtime control planes prevent permission drift when benchmark-validated agents attempt actions outside their authorized scope?

This preprint formalizes the existing public evidence record as a technical synthesis. No new experiment, dataset, measurement, or validation is claimed beyond the source article and its cited evidence.

The eval dashboard was green. The agent still tried to take an action it was never allowed to take. That gap between "passed" and "safe" has a name, and it is not a model problem.

II. KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Passed is not safe. An eval measures whether the agent can do the task, not whether it is permitted to take the action it chose.
- Permission drift is a control-plane failure. It happens when stale memory, a wide tool scope, or a missing approval gate lets confidence override policy.
- The fix is authorization, not a better prompt. Capability scope, policy match, and a dry-run gate sit between the decision and the action.
- Reliable agents are operators with governors. Autonomy without a boundary is not intelligence. It is unbounded blast radius.

III. THE GREEN CHECKMARK WAS LYING

Here is the moment that should worry anyone shipping autonomous agents. The evaluation suite is green. Every task in the harness passed. The demo is clean. Then the same agent, given a real inbox and a real set of tools, decides to send an external email, delete a record, or push a change it was never authorized to touch. Nothing hallucinated. The model was confident and, in a narrow sense, correct. It simply crossed a boundary that the eval never tested.

That is permission drift: the slow separation between what an agent is *capable* of and what it is *allowed* to do, discovered at the worst possible time, in production, on a live action. The uncomfortable truth is that a passing eval and an unsafe action are not contradictions. They measure different things. One measures capability under a fixed task distribution. The other is a question of governance that most agent stacks never answer.

IV. WHAT PERMISSION DRIFT ACTUALLY IS

Permission drift is rarely one bug. It is a compound of three ordinary conditions that are individually harmless and collectively dangerous.

Tool access wider than the task. An agent handed a broad toolset "just in case" will eventually use a tool the current task never justified. Scope granted for convenience becomes scope exercised under pressure.

Stale memory overriding current policy. An agent that remembers "last time I was allowed to auto-approve" can act on that memory after the policy has changed. Memory is not authorization, but an agent without a governor treats it that way.

No gate between decision and execution. The model produces an action and the runtime executes it in the same

breath. There is no moment where a boundary check can say "not this one." Confidence becomes permission by default.

None of these is a reasoning failure. You cannot prompt your way out of them, because the problem is not what the model thinks. It is what the system lets the model *do*.

V. READ THE TRACE, NOT THE VIBE

When an agent oversteps, the instinct is to blame the model and add a warning to the system prompt. Resist it. Open the trace instead. In almost every real incident, the log shows the same shape: a tool call whose scope did not match the active policy, immediately after a memory or context read that carried a stale assumption forward. The failure is legible. It sits at a specific span, at a specific timestamp, at the exact moment the action crossed the boundary.

This is why observability that treats agents like chat logs is not enough. You need the trace of tool calls, scopes, policy decisions, and approvals as first-class events. If you cannot point to the span where confidence outran permission, you cannot fix it, and you certainly cannot prove to anyone that it will not happen again.

VI. THREE CHECKS BETWEEN DECISION AND ACTION

TABLE 1

Check	Question It Answers	Failure It Stops
Capability scope	Is this tool in scope for this task?	Wide tools used outside their justification
Policy match	Does the current policy permit this action now?	Stale memory overriding a changed rule
Dry-run / approval gate	What happens if we simulate before we commit?	Irreversible actions with no human checkpoint

VII. THE FIX IS A CONTROL PLANE, NOT A CLEVERER PROMPT

The durable fix puts three checks between the agent's decision and the runtime's execution, and it does so in code, not in a paragraph of instructions the model can talk itself out of.

Capability scope. Bind the tools available to the task actually in flight. An email-triage task does not get filesystem delete. Least privilege for agents is the same discipline it has always been for services: grant the narrowest capability that completes the job, and grant it for the duration of that job only.

Policy match. Before an action executes, evaluate it against the current policy, not the agent's recollection of policy. The policy is the source of truth. Memory is a hint. When they disagree, the boundary wins.

Dry-run and approval gate. For anything irreversible or externally visible, simulate first and surface the intended action for a decision: run, block, or ask a human. Most damage comes from the last inch, the commit step, so put the gate exactly there.

VIII. BEFORE AND AFTER

The test that matters is not the demo. It is the rerun. Take the exact task that produced the unsafe action and run it again through the control plane. Same prompt. Same model. Different operating boundary. The first run overreached. The second run hits the gate: the out-of-scope tool is refused, the stale-policy action is blocked, and the irreversible step waits for approval. The agent did not get smarter. The system got a governor.

That difference is the entire product. It is the line between a flashy autonomous demo and an agent you would actually let near a production system.

IX. THE PRINCIPLE

Reliable agents are not chatbots with tools. They are operators with governors. The market spent the last cycle proving that agents can act. The next cycle belongs to whoever can prove, with a trace, that their agents act only within a boundary, and that the boundary holds when the model is confident and wrong.

So before you ship the next autonomous workflow, ask the only question that separates a demo from an operator: when this agent decides to do something it should not, what stops it? If the answer lives in a prompt, you do not have a control plane. You have permission drift waiting for a timestamp.

XI. LIMITATIONS AND CLAIM BOUNDARY

The analysis is primarily conceptual and architectural. It requires multi-tenant, multi-tool, and adversarial runtime evaluation before claims of general effectiveness can be made. Claim boundary - State explicitly that evaluation measures capability while runtime policy determines authorization; do not imply that passing an eval grants production permission.

XII. REFERENCES AND SOURCE RECORD

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Part of the Skynet "Permission Drift" campaign; companion platform analyses and a wound-first video accompany this post.

Signed by Skynet.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

EXZIL CALANZA is an independent researcher and software builder based in Iloilo City, Philippines. His work focuses on browser and desktop automation, reproducible evaluation, agent reliability, workflow verification, and AI-assisted systems engineering.