

THE IRREGULAR WARFARE CENTER

Spotlight

Vol 3 Ed. 1

Deter | Defend | Defeat

May 2025

The Department of Defense (DoD’s) Irregular Warfare Center Hosts Second Annual Symposium

The Department of Defense’s Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) successfully hosted its second annual Symposium on Total Defense from March 26–27, 2025, at the Sheraton Pentagon City in Arlington, Va. The two-day event brought together more than 300 attendees from across the U.S. government, military, academia, industry, and international partners from 17 nations.

Participants traveled from across the globe, including Afghanistan, Anguilla, Australia, Canada, Republic of Congo, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Mongolia, Netherlands, Philippines, Senegal, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Sweden, and Yemen, underscoring the importance of total defense in the face of irregular threats.

“The IWC’s Total Defense Symposium shows that resilience and readiness are key to deterrence,” said Dr. Dennis Walters, IWC Director. “Our role is to build connections that turn insight into action, helping our nation’s warfighters stay ahead of threats.”

The first day of the symposium focused on national resilience in the face of asymmetric threats. Dr. Walters opened the event with welcoming remarks, followed by a keynote address from Dr. Jonathan Schroden, Director of the Center for Naval Analysis (CNA), Center for Stability and Development. Expert-led panels explored topics including whole-of-nation total defense models, unmanned aerial systems (UAS), and cyber resilience. The day concluded with a case study discussion of Singapore’s Total Defense approach.

“The IWC Symposium was a great chance to connect with the community of irregular warfare practitioners and scholars, to stay at the cutting edge of debates and dialogs over lessons from ongoing conflicts and the future of IW, and to remind ourselves of the critical value that irregular approaches should and will play in deterring conflict and prevailing in conflict should deterrence fail,” said Schroden.

Brig. Gen. (R) Chris Burns, IWC Senior Advisor (contractor) and Deputy Advisor for the Northern Hemisphere & Homeland Defense, served as a lead facilitator throughout the event, guiding Q&A sessions and highlighting takeaways to drive discussion.

Day two of the IWC Symposium centered on countering hybrid threats. Dr. Sean McFate, Professor at the College of International Security Affairs (CISA) at National Defense University, delivered the keynote address. “The IWC is the top forum for bringing practitioners and thinkers together of irregular warfare in a mission-focused way,” said McFate about the 2025 Symposium. “The IWC is about the irregular warfighter.”

Subsequent Day 2 panels addressed deterrence strategies, comprehensive defense frameworks, and the role of resistance forces in national defense. Participants drew valuable insights from the two-day symposium. The discourse both during the presentations and networking sessions furthered development of irregular challenges and paths to address them. “We’re definitely seeing a broader socialization of IW with our partners and allies,” said Dr. Doowan Lee, Georgetown University Law Center and 2025 Symposium Panelist. “Key is how to shape, plan, and execute multilateral irregular operations in the competition space. IW is persistent operations that are most

effective when conducted during left to bang.”

By convening participants from a variety of disciplines, the 2025 Symposium embodied the IWC’s vision of connecting instruction with operationalization. As irregular threats continue to advance, the IWC reinforces its commitment to building an adaptable global network which serves as a force multiplier for the U.S. warfighter.

“This event exemplifies what the Center was created to do—connect stakeholders across sectors and borders to improve the U.S. and allied understanding and application of irregular warfare concepts,” said Dr. Lori Leffler, IWC Deputy Director & Chief of Staff. “We’re honored to bring together this community to promote efforts to protect the homeland.”

About the IWC:
The IWC prepares the warfighter to conduct irregular warfare across the spectrum of conflict by bridging instruction to operationalizing IW using next-generation techniques and concepts that enhance the lethality of the force and positions the United States and key allies and partners to remain ahead of the threat.

The IWC operates to transform the global, strategic mindset by coupling conventional combat power with robust IW methodologies to provide options to current and emerging threats in support of the nation’s warfighters.

The IWC’s staff is composed of experienced combat veterans who understand what is necessary to fight and win. Their knowledge is enhanced by the Center’s distinguished academics who provide in-depth, timely, and relevant analytical support to accomplish the Department’s mission. The combination of warfighting experience and intellectual forethought is novel within the government and continuously provides innovative solutions to the most complex challenges.

“The Irregular Warfare Center’s success stems directly from its deliberate cultivation of an organizational culture that not only tolerates but embraces calculated risk-taking. This approach stands in stark contrast to the prevailing institutional paralysis that often characterizes military decision-making. By fostering an environment where team members understand that innovative solutions require experimentation—and that experimentation inherently involves failure—the IWC has created a space where creative problem-solving can flourish. This cultural shift represents more than just a philosophical stance; it’s a strategic imperative in an era where our adversaries are rapidly adapting their approaches to irregular warfare,” – Dr. Dennis Walters, IWC Director.

- The Center’s foundation is built upon three Lines of Effort:
- ◇ AMPLIFY and collaborate to build an innovative and adaptable global networked IW community of interest.
 - ◇ Strategically ILLUMINATE current and future irregular threats, crises, and obstacles.
 - ◇ ADDRESS current and future irregular threats to the US, allies, and partners by providing optionality to leaders.

Through these LOEs, the Irregular Warfare Center addresses current and emerging security concerns and challenges with world-class research, rigorous analysis, top-tier strategic education and training for U.S. and international partners.

For more information, visit www.irregularwarfarecenter.org.

Director’s Corner



Dr. Dennis Walters
IWC Director



Greeting from the IWC,

This is the (Irregular) Way: the IWC’s Approach to Fighting in a Complex System

If my time in military leadership, gaining a doctorate in leadership, and leading organizations within the DoD has taught me anything, it’s that an institution’s culture will empower or enfeeble it in the pursuit of its goals. With that in mind, let me briefly make the case to you that organizations often become risk-averse to the detriment of their ability to achieve their goals, and suggest that the IWC is attempting to model a better way.

The Irregular Warfare Center’s success stems directly from its deliberate cultivation of an organizational culture that not only tolerates but embraces calculated risk-taking. This approach stands in stark contrast to the prevailing institutional paralysis that often characterizes military decision-making. By fostering an environment where team members understand that innovative solutions require experimentation—and that experimentation inherently involves failure—the IWC has created a space where creative problem-solving can flourish. This cultural shift represents more than just a philosophical stance; it’s a strategic imperative in an era where our adversaries are rapidly adapting their approaches to irregular warfare.

The Center’s Functional Area Networks (FANs) exemplify this adaptive approach in practice. These networks, which span areas like contested logistics, mission assurance, medical resilience, intelligence, operations in the information environment, and emerging technology, operate as dynamic communities of practice rather than traditional military units. Each FAN brings together diverse professionals from across the Department of Defense, interagency partners, academia, and the private sector who share expertise and collaborate on complex problems. What makes these networks particularly distinctive is their volunteer nature; unlike traditional hierarchical structures that can impede rapid response, FANs operate as dynamic, self-organizing networks of subject matter experts who can quickly coalesce around emerging challenges. The FANs facilitate everything from knowledge sharing and collective problem-solving to resource mobilization and educational initiatives. This structure enables the IWC to maintain a persistent, global presence in key functional areas while remaining agile enough to adapt as new irregular warfare challenges emerge.

One of our staff told me of a poll he conducted among his mid-level officer students studying the battle of Midway. Of over 100 students asked whether “given today’s command culture and all other things being equal, would the US have won the Battle of Midway,” nearly all said the US would lose decisively, and not one argued that the US would win. It was Admiral Nimitz’s willingness to risk—to trust his Captains and Commanders to make tough decisions and certainly to make mistakes—that led to victory in a pivotal battle. Much like Nimitz’s trust in his commanders at Midway, the IWC’s willingness to empower volunteer networks has proven remarkably effective. By creating space for initiative and calculated risk-taking, these networks have demonstrated an extraordinary ability to self-organize and deliver results, as our recent successes demonstrate. This approach represents a fundamental shift from traditional military hierarchies to a more adaptive, network-centric model better suited to addressing irregular warfare challenges.

Two recent successes illustrate the successes of our innovative FAN system and traditional Training and Education approach. A partner nation approached us with a problem set that spanned several functional needs that happened to overlap with our most developed FANs. Within the space of months, we were able to pulse out a request for volunteers to the FANs, construct a team consisting of volunteers from widely varied professional backgrounds and skillsets, and empower that team to travel to the partner nation to address their need and train local leadership to empower their own personnel to address future iterations of the problem set.

Similarly, a different partner nation faced intense influence campaign from a powerful rival. If successful, this influence campaign would have likely spelled the end of democracy in our partner nation. Anticipating this danger, however, IWC teams invested thousands of man hours teaching, training, and assisting counterparts in our partner nation to develop the necessary legal frameworks, countermeasures, and best practices to defeat the malign intent of its stronger rival. These efforts are part of the reason that partner nation remains a free democracy today.

In today’s rapidly evolving security environment, the ability to adapt quickly and effectively to emerging threats is not just advantageous—it’s essential for survival. The pervasive culture of risk aversion within the Department of Defense threatens to hamstring our ability to respond to irregular warfare challenges that demand innovative, often unconventional solutions. The IWC’s approach, emphasizing adaptability, calculated risk-taking, and rapid response through its FAN structure, offers a promising model for addressing complex, adaptive threats. As our recent successes demonstrate, this approach enables us to support partner nations effectively while building lasting capacity for addressing future challenges. In an era where our adversaries are constantly evolving their approaches to warfare, we cannot afford to let risk aversion dictate our response. The IWC’s model shows us a better way forward.

Stay tuned for more great things!
Dr. Dennis Walters, IWC Director



More than 300 attendees were welcomed during the Irregular Warfare Center (IWC)’s second annual Symposium on Total Defense from March 26–27, 2025, at the Sheraton Pentagon City in Arlington, Va.



Dr. Dennis Walters, IWC Director, provided opening remarks during the Center’s second annual Symposium on Total Defense from March 26–27, 2025, at the Sheraton Pentagon City in Arlington, Va.

PRISM: Call For Manuscripts

The IWC is seeking Manuscripts for an upcoming special edition of PRISM!

Submit today!

CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS:

“Countering China in the Indo-Pacific and Beyond”

The Indo-Pacific region stands at the center of geopolitical competition, with China growing influence presenting complex challenges to the rules-based international order. With rising challenges across the Pacific, the Indo-Pacific region is becoming a critical arena for strategic competition. PRISM: The Journal of Complex Operations invites manuscripts for our upcoming special issue focused on understanding and countering the IWC’s challenges across the globe.

We seek insightful analyses addressing irregular and hybrid threats related to the IWC, including competition with China across the full spectrum of national power: Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Economic, Financial, Intelligence, and Law Enforcement (DMIFE) domains. Of particular interest are articles exploring strategies to reasonably effective deterrence and response. Manuscripts are accepted for consideration.

No one has a monopoly of insight into these vital issues of 21st-century security. PRISM invites manuscripts from national and international security thought leaders in defense, diplomacy, development, intelligence, and related fields. We will publish provocative, insightful, and well-reasoned articles that illuminate paths forward in the critical arena of great power competition.

A requested, peer-reviewed journal, PRISM informs and engages the national and international security community through its distinctive platform made through the Irregular Warfare Center. Future articles should be between 4000-8000 words, and sent to PRISM@irregularwarfarecenter.org with the subject “China Issue”.

We are seeking book reviews, with particular interest in books related to the broader theme of the issue. Please submit book reviews to the same email address with the subject “China Book Review.”



Media Highlights

“Future Challenges to Cognitive Superiority,” by Rand Waltzman – Adjunct Senior Information Scientist – RAND Corporation
<https://irregularwarfarecenter.org/publications/perspectives/future-challenges-to-cognitive-superiority/>

“OSS 2.0: Emphasizing the Importance of Human Intelligence in Irregular Warfare for Great Power Competition,” by Chris Cruden – Senior Director of Capability Integration – Applied Research Associates & Doug Livermore – Senior Vice President for Solution Engineering – CenCore Group
https://irregularwarfarecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/P25_Emphazizing-the-Importance-of-Human-Intelligence.pdf

“Critical Minerals, U.S. National Security, and Africa,” by Peter Chin, IWC Advisor, Valens Global contractor
<https://irregularwarfarecenter.org/publications/insights/critical-minerals-u-s-national-security-and-africa/>

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Ridge Runner IW Exercise showcases & reinforces value of IWC’s & WVNG’s unique partnership during DV Day

The West Virginia National Guard, in partnership with the Department of Defense’s Irregular Warfare Center, hosted distinguished visitors during the Ridge Runner/ Ridge Healer Irregular Warfare Exercise (IWX) at Camp Dawson in Kingwood, West Virginia, on April 15, 2025. Participants were varied across the irregular warfare spectrum, all with an interest in Ridge Runner IWX, a special forces multi-domain exercise for both U.S. Forces, as well as Allied and Partner Nation forces, tailored to specific evolving threats and scenarios faced by modern special operations and conventional forces.

“The United States must prioritize a strategy of denial to prevent regional hegemony,” said WVNG Adjutant General Maj. Gen. James Seward. “This involves creating a robust coalition of states capable of exerting power to deter aggression. I’m not aware of any other exercise that does it quite the way we do it here in West Virginia.”

The Adjutant General was joined by Mr. Colby Jenkins, performing duties as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, and Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) Director, Dr. Dennis Walters for opening remarks to an audience that included Dr. Sandra Hobson, Director, Secretariat for Special Operations.

“If you can remember anything that I say today, I hope you remember three words - this is



From left: Performing the Duties of ASD SO/LIC, Mr. Colby Jenkins; USN Master Chief Petty Officer Brad Rhineland; Jordan Farenhem; IWC Chief of Operation Erik Herr; PDASD Dr. Sandra Hobson; Josephine Mintel; Sarah Daly; IWC Deputy Director & Chief of Staff Dr. Lori Leffler; Jacqueline Baumgartner; Daniel McCormick; and Dr. Sean McFate participated in the Ridge Runner/ Ridge Healer Irregular Warfare Exercise 25-01 Distinguished Visitors Day at Camp Dawson in Kingwood, West Virginia, on April 15, 2025.

important,” said Jenkins.

For the past 20 years, Jenkins said, our nation has been focused on counterterrorism, but irregular warfare and operating globally in the grey zone has never gone away. Today, while it might appear quiet, the need is great for those who can operate with that expertise and skill set.

“The demand of where we are meeting China, not only in Asia, but around the world, is very real,” Jenkins said. “That’s why this is important. The skills and the exercises that you’re participating in now, that you’re training others in, that you’re taking back to your nations, is right where we need to be.”

“For the past couple of years, we’ve been working very closely with the team here at Ridge Runner to prepare our own forces and our allies and partners to function in some pretty complex environments,” Walters said. Since the IWC inception in 2022, they have been building global functional area networks built around concepts such as contested logistics, defending the homeland, non-traditional intelligence, non-traditional communications, and medical support to the regular warfare.

With the Ridge Healer platform, they’ve been able to pull ideas into the operational and strategic realms. This medical network now includes hundreds of individuals, both military and civilian, international and home space, as well as a couple of university medical centers.

Thanks to that, IWC pulled a cross functional team together and deployed it to Eastern Europe to work with a partner nation to train them and their civilian doctors in providing medical support to their country under extreme conditions.

“That’s Eastern Europe, so I’ll leave it to you to decide what extreme conditions mean,” Walters said, “but that same capability that we’re building inside that partner nation will be available to U.S. Forces in the event that we’re finding ourselves operating in contested or semi-contested environment.”

“Built into the foundation of the Ridge Healer is the idea that we train those civilian doctors of partner nations,” Walters said, “and then we bring them here to West Virginia for continued training and validation.”

“If you take that medical example, and then you look at the other networks we’re building around contested logistics, communications, intelligence and all the other things that factor into IW, the idea is to bring all of that package together and exercise it here inside the Ridge Runner/Ridge Healer complex, and then take that and make that a true national level capability,” Walters said. “So, we got a lot of work to do, but we’ve got a great team and a partnership here with the West Virginia Guard and my own team at the Irregular Warfare Center.”

“There’s nothing better for lethality and preparedness than the Ridge Runner, Ridge Healer



IWC Director Dr. Dennis Walters and Performing the Duties of ASD SO/LIC, Mr. Colby Jenkins during the Ridge Runner/ Ridge Healer Irregular Warfare Exercise 25-01 Distinguished Visitors Day at Camp Dawson in Kingwood, West Virginia, on April 15, 2025.

programs of the West Virginia National Guard,” Seward said.

“The fact that we’re here in West Virginia is not by chance,” Jenkins said. “It’s because we have leadership [in the WV National Guard] who know this is important, who stand up and make it possible. So, on behalf of our nation - the little slice that I represent -thank you. Thank you, West Virginia.”

Ridge Runner IWX 25-01 featured more than 500 participants and observers from four nations. The official exercise ran through April 16, 2025, across five lanes throughout West Virginia and one lane in South Carolina. The exercise is jointly supported through the IWC and provided a training and validation platform for the Special Operations Detachment- Europe, Headquarters and Headquarters Det., 2/19th Special Forces Group (A), Forward Support Co. (E Co.), 2/19th SFG(A), elements of the 9th Psypops Bn., 4/10th SFG(A), 4/7th SFG(A), elements of the 10th Air Support Operations Squadron, and the 130th Airlift Wing and its 167th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron.

Current Initiatives, Upcoming Events & IW Educational Offerings

IWC GLOBAL NETWORK

Mission

The Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) is a congressionally mandated organization, charged with developing irregular warfare (IW) knowledge for the Department of Defense (DoD) and advancing the understanding of IW concepts.

The IW Global Network employs a strategic approach to addressing global irregular challenges through the establishment of Functional Area Networks (FANs). These networks are centered around areas of common interest in collaboration with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict, and key global partners.

The IW FANs act as a force multiplier by creating a comprehensive whole of government approach. These networks foster cooperation across various sectors including the DoD, intelligence, private sector, and global partners.

With this approach, multiple stakeholders from different sectors collaborate, share information, and pool resources to address issues that span multiple policy areas and ultimately increase irregular warfare capabilities.

IWC STUDENT WORKING GROUP

Mission

The Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) is a congressionally mandated organization, charged with developing irregular warfare (IW) knowledge for the DoD and advancing the understanding of IW concepts.

To help achieve congressional intent, the director of the IWC ordered the creation of the IW Global Network, which consists of Functional Area Networks (FANs). These Functional Area Networks are centered around areas of common interest in collaboration with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict, and key global partners.

The Student Working Group (SWG) represents the IWC's connection to civilian institutions of higher education, and aims to create a supportive environment for academically talented and motivated young individuals. Within this network, students will actively participate in advanced learning, intellectual exploration, and collaborative projects related to IW. The group provides opportunities for participants to deliver into challenging subjects, engage in research activities, and connect with both the involved peers and experienced professionals.

The IWC is seeking dedicated undergraduate and graduate students from colleges and universities throughout the United States pursuing degrees in all fields are encouraged to apply, including the following:

- Political Science and History
- Foreign Languages and Linguistics
- Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Business and Finance

Current FANs

- Intelligence
- Medical Resilience
- Emerging Technology
- Contested Logistics
- Operations in the Information Environment (OIE)
- Mission Assurance

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The Department of Defense’s Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) is excited to add *PRISM: The Journal of Complex Operations* to our robust publication offerings!

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PRISM - ARCHIVE

The Department of Defense's Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) is extremely proud to announce the Center will assume publishing duties and responsibilities of *PRISM: The Journal of Complex Operations*.

Since July 2011, *PRISM* has been a premiere journal offering provocative articles relating to national and international security affairs. By reaching out to thought leaders from the national and international security policy-maker, practitioner, and academic communities the quarterly publication has established a reputation for offering keen insight into the evolving global threat environment.

For authors interested in publishing in *PRISM*, the Center encourages submissions of original manuscripts that are informative, insightful, and provocative while addressing the full range of factors contributing to global security. Manuscripts should be sent to PRISM@irregularwarfarecenter.org with a subject line of "Manuscript"

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What is Irregular Warfare?

...and why does it matter?

Irregular warfare (IW) is defined in several key U.S. government sources, each emphasizing distinct but complementary aspects. The list below offers a sampling of the IW definitions and just like IW itself, even defining it is a struggle:

Joint Publication-1 defines irregular warfare as “a form of warfare where states and nonstate actors campaign to assure or coerce states or other groups through indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities, either as the primary approach or in concert with conventional warfare.”

The **2020 Irregular Warfare Annex** describes it as “a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy. Irregular warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will.”

Congress, in statute, defines irregular warfare as “Department of Defense activities not involving armed conflict that support predetermined United States policy and military objectives conducted by, with, and through regular forces, irregular forces, groups, and individuals.”

Congress also defined irregular warfare in **Section 1202 of the FY2018 NDAA** as “provid[ing] support to foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals engaged in supporting or facilitating authorized military operations by United States special operations forces.”

The Irregular Warfare Center does not seek to revise or add to these definitions. Instead, it works with them and identifies their common ground:

Each definition—explicitly or implicitly—acknowledges that IW involves a wide range of actors: states, non-state groups (such as insurgents, militias, and proxies), and individuals. This reflects the reality that IW operates across formal and informal networks, making it inherently complex and dynamic.

Each definition centers on influence—shaping behavior, perceptions, and legitimacy—rather than conventional military victory. This distinction is critical: IW is defined not by the presence of combat, but by its strategic effects, often achieved without kinetic force.

All definitions highlight the use of indirect, unconventional, or asymmetric methods. Activities such as information operations and cyberspace activities are central to IW and set it apart from traditional warfare.

Terms Associated with IW

Similar to the term “irregular warfare,” these terms have varying definitions among U.S. and international organizations.

Hybrid Warfare: “an interplay or fusion of conventional as well as unconventional instruments of power and tools of subversion. These instruments or tools are blended in a synchronized manner to exploit the vulnerabilities of an antagonist and achieve synergistic effects.” [NATO]

Gray Zone: “a realm of international relations between peaceful interstate diplomacy, economic activity, and people-to-people contact on one end of the spectrum and armed conflict on the other, and gray zone activities as coercive or subversive actions to achieve objectives at the expense of others in contravention or in the absence of international norms.” [ODNI]

Asymmetric Warfare: “Warfare in which belligerents are mismatched in their military capabilities or their accustomed methods of engagement.” [DOS]

Political Warfare: “the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives” [CRS]

Resistance Operations: “a nation’s organized, whole-of-society effort, encompassing the full range of activities from nonviolent to violent, led by a legally established government (potentially exiled/displaced or shadow) to reestablish independence and autonomy within its sovereign territory that has been wholly or partially occupied by a foreign power” [ROC]

Strategic Resilience: the capacity, at national and collective level, to prepare for, resist, respond to, and quickly recover from strategic shocks and disruptions, across the full spectrum of threats. [NATO]

IWC FANs in Motion

Irregular Warfare Center

IW Global Information

FUNCTIONAL AREA NETWORK (FAN)

Overview

To enhance the DoD's effectiveness in irregular warfare by facilitating research and collaboration across military, government, and civilian sectors.

Key Objectives

- Policy Recommendations: Provide recommendations to address current and emerging threats.
- Drive Strategic Initiatives: Support IW efforts more effectively and align with strategic competition objectives.
- Foster Global Collaboration: Connecting and communicating with professionals across borders.

Contact

fan@irregularwarfarecenter.org

Tab D

VOLUME 2 NO. 4

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The Irregular Warfare Center’s OIE (Operations in the Information Environment) Functional Area Network (FAN) Tab D bi-weekly newsletter!

This newsletter employs expert analytic research techniques, bolstered by machine learning and original-language, open-source information, to pinpoint vulnerabilities in the current narrative of global competitors, thereby empowering the U.S. with informational advantages. Serving as a potent force multiplier, the OIE FAN facilitates education and problem-solving within the realm of information operations.

For those interested in receiving the IWC’s Tab D newsletter, please reach out via email at fan@irregularwarfarecenter.org.

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