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IW PERSPECTIVES



OSS 2.0: Emphasizing the Importance of Human Intelligence in Irregular Warfare for Great Power Competition

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As the global landscape shifts into an era of Great Power Competition, characterized by unconventional threats and complex geopolitical dynamics, the need for a reimagined Office of Strategic Services (OSS) framework has never been more pressing. The revival of an [OSS 2.0](#) would empower the Department of Defense (DoD) with enhanced Human Intelligence (HUMINT) capabilities that are critical for navigating the intricacies of Irregular Warfare (IW). Leveraging an updated OSS [concept](#), the DoD could build deeper, longer-lasting relationships with foreign partners and local populations, laying the foundation for invaluable intelligence collection and clandestine or covert operations.

The Role of HUMINT in IW

In the so-called “new” era of Great Power Competition, AKA Cold War 2.0, where the DoD prioritizes Irregular Warfare, the timeless adage “everything old is new again” rings especially true. [HUMINT](#), a discipline often dismissed as a Cold War relic, is indispensable to IW, as it offers unparalleled insights into enemy tactics, operational plans, and overall capabilities. It is the bedrock of operations that requires an intimate understanding of the local population, its culture, and the situational dynamics on the ground. Through HUMINT, military leaders gain vital information to neutralize key enemy leaders, unravel supply chains, and disrupt operational plans.

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HUMINT is not solely about intelligence collection; it is the critical starting point for building relationships of trust with foreign populations—relationships necessary to influence them and support military operations. In any IW campaign, success hinges on forging bonds with local leaders and communities, enabling counterterrorism efforts, dissuading potential competitors, and, if deterrence fails, opening avenues for undermining enemy actions through intelligence-driven activities. In essence, HUMINT networks developed over time serve as a platform for both proactive intelligence collection and operational disruption in IW environments.

Differentiating HUMINT Collection Needs: DoD vs. CIA

While the DoD and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) share overlapping collection requirements, their distinct mandates make it clear that the DoD must take the lead on [HUMINT](#) for military operations, especially those involving IW. The CIA's focus on strategic intelligence serves a broader foreign policy agenda, whereas the DoD's operational needs require more immediate, actionable intelligence to support battlefield [decisions](#). The CIA's dependence on the military for support and access during the Global War on Terrorism ([GWOT](#)) highlights this disconnect.

The DoD's wide-reaching personnel base—including active-duty military and civilian employees—positions it to effectively gather tactical intelligence in support of IW. Conversely, the CIA operates with a smaller, more specialized workforce focused on gaining “exquisite” intelligence in environments that demand high-level access. While both entities contribute valuable insights, the DoD's vast [reach](#) and its alignment with operational commanders' needs make it uniquely suited to lead HUMINT efforts on the ground.

For example, programs like the [127e counterterrorism](#) initiative in Africa demonstrate how the DoD's extensive footprint allows for more fluid intelligence gathering, particularly in active conflict zones. In contrast, the CIA, often working within hostile counterintelligence (CI) environments, focuses on high-stakes intelligence at senior levels of foreign governments. The complementary strengths of both agencies are evident, but in IW, the DoD's role as a HUMINT leader is indispensable.

HUMINT's Crucial Role in Great Power Competition

The increasing complexity of modern warfare and the advanced capabilities of Russia and the People's Republic of China ([PRC](#)) underscore the importance of HUMINT. As technology continues to evolve, so do the ways in which adversaries hide their activities. HUMINT offers a unique [advantage](#) in uncovering these efforts—often by collecting intelligence in hard-target countries through personal contact with agents and intermediaries.

A prime example of this was the strategic [declassification](#) of intelligence ahead of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The United States used HUMINT reporting to selectively release intelligence, creating a global coalition that stood firmly against Russia's actions. This demonstrates how HUMINT, when paired with modern technological tools and media platforms, becomes an influential instrument not just for intelligence but also for shaping global narratives.

HUMINT's ability to reveal hidden networks—proxies, mercenaries, criminal elements—is irreplaceable in this competitive, technology-reliant [landscape](#). While signals intelligence (SIGINT) and imagery intelligence (IMINT) provide crucial technical insights, HUMINT delves into the



intentions, alliances, and internal workings of these networks. As global adversaries increasingly rely on clandestine operations, only HUMINT can fully reveal their intentions and capabilities, often exploiting vulnerabilities hidden from technical surveillance.

Revitalizing OSS for the Future of IW

To meet the challenges posed by modern Great Power Competition, the revival of OSS principles will prove critical for the DoD. An OSS 2.0 would focus on building long-term relationships with key foreign partners and populations, using HUMINT to gather vital intelligence and conduct clandestine or covert [operations](#).

During World War II, the original OSS pioneered unconventional warfare behind enemy [lines](#), gathering intelligence and supporting resistance movements in Europe. The OSS's strength lay in its ability to build relationships with local actors, leveraging their knowledge and access to support sabotage missions and gather critical intelligence. These foundational OSS principles remain relevant today, but must be modernized for the complexities of the current security environment.

The DoD's global reach far surpasses that of any other U.S. agency, with over [1.39 million](#) active service members and a presence in [159 countries](#). This extensive footprint presents the DoD with an unmatched opportunity to lead in HUMINT collection, particularly in IW environments. The CIA, while capable of penetrating hostile civilian environments, should focus on providing high-level insights to policymakers, allowing the DoD to dominate in immediate operational intelligence required for IW campaigning.

Leveraging HUMINT for Success in IW

One of the DoD's greatest strengths in building relationships and gathering intelligence comes from initiatives like Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET). While not explicitly a HUMINT program, [JCETs](#) create long-term rapport with foreign militaries by training with partner nations. These relationships, built over time through shared experiences, mirror the rapport-building that is crucial to HUMINT success.

In these exercises, U.S. forces learn not only tactical skills but also the political, cultural, and social nuances of their partner nations, gaining insights that inform future IW campaigns. Just as important, these training events establish a foundation of trust, enabling future intelligence operations.

In the modern context of Great Power Competition, JCETs are just one example of how the DoD's global engagements and relationships lay the groundwork for the success of HUMINT activities.

Preparing for the Future of HUMINT and IW

As the DoD looks to the future, it must take actionable steps to revitalize its HUMINT capabilities through a new OSS-inspired model.

Relationships: First, the DoD must embrace a culture of building relationships before conflict arises—laying the foundation for intelligence collection in times of crisis. Persistent engagement across the globe offers unparalleled opportunities to establish and deepen networks of trust, providing the critical intelligence needed when conflict escalates.



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Training: Second, training programs must adapt to the realities of modern IW. By incorporating lessons from the GWOT and preparing for future scenarios specific to multi-domain operations (MDO), the DoD can ensure its personnel are ready to meet the challenges of Great Power Competition. Enhancing HUMINT training through external partnerships and operationalizing intelligence at every level will be key to future success.

Execution: Lastly, the DoD must be prepared to execute swiftly and effectively when the time comes. Establishing OSS-inspired operational concepts, with clear authorities and focused objectives, will ensure that HUMINT is not only ready but fully operational when needed most.

The future of war will be shaped by those who can master the art of HUMINT. Sensors can't detect intentions or desires. Intercepted phone calls and emails can't be trusted at face value in an era of deepfakes and misinformation.

The DoD must leverage its vast placement and access, its full complement of HUMINT collectors and decades-old history of building trusted, global relationships amongst allied warfighters.

To win the IW fight in a GPC world—we must learn from the past while we build for the future.



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