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What is Counterintelligence?



Department of Defense counterintelligence efforts merely scratch the surface of the proverbial iceberg of clandestine and covert activities that both the People's Republic of China and Russia direct against the United States and its partners. Source: Vecteezy

Counterintelligence (CI) is often referred to as a mission, an intelligence discipline, or a function. Aptly put, Counterintelligence is a sword and a shield that detects, identifies, and protects the Joint Force from foreign intelligence entities (FIE) and insider threats while exploiting and neutralizing FIE efforts to target and exploit U.S. Government (USG) and Department of Defense (DOD) equities, interests, alliances, and partnerships around the globe. This fact sheet seeks to clarify the role, function, and mission of CI within the Joint Force and the SOF enterprise.

CI activities are integrated, as appropriate, into all operations,

programs, systems, exercises, planning, doctrine, strategies, policies, and information architectures. CI activities are undertaken as part of an integrated DOD and national effort to detect, identify, assess, exploit, penetrate, degrade, and counter or neutralize espionage, intelligence collection, sabotage, sedition, subversion, assassination, and terrorist activities conducted for or on behalf of a foreign power, organizations, persons, or their agents.¹ These malign activities are directed against U.S. national security interests or DOD and its personnel, materiel, information, facilities, and activities. CI activities are one or

Relevant Terms and Definitions

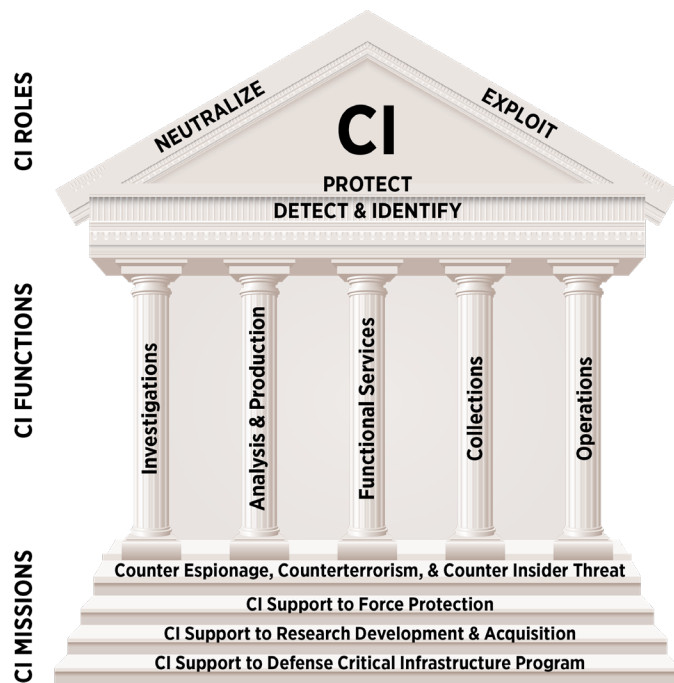
Counterintelligence

Information gathered and activities undertaken as part of an integrated Department of Defense (DOD) and national effort to detect, identify, assess, exploit, penetrate, degrade, and counter or neutralize espionage, intelligence collection, sabotage, sedition, subversion, assassination, and terrorist activities conducted for or on behalf of foreign powers, organizations, persons, or their agents directed against U.S. national security interests or DOD and its personnel, information, materiel, facilities, and activities.

Foreign Intelligence Entity

Any known or suspected foreign organization, person, or group (governmental, public, or private) that conducts intelligence activities to acquire U.S. information, block or impair U.S. intelligence collection, influence U.S. policy, or disrupt U.S. systems and programs. The term includes foreign intelligence and security services and international terrorism.

CI Insider Threat A person, known or suspected, who uses their authorized access to DOD facilities, systems, equipment, information, or infrastructure to damage, disrupt operations, compromise DOD information, or commit espionage on behalf of an FIE.



more CI functions undertaken to support the four CI missions of:²

1. Countering espionage, international terrorism, and the CI insider threat.
2. CI support to force protection.
3. CI support to research, development, and acquisition.
4. CI support to the Defense Critical Infrastructure Program.

The *National Counterintelligence Strategy 2020-2022* highlighted threats to the United States posed by FIE have become more complex, diverse, and harmful to U.S. interests. FIE employs the innovative combinations of traditional spying, economic espionage, and cyber operations to infiltrate and exploit U.S. supply chains and critical infrastructure and to steal sensitive information, research, technology, and industrial secrets.³ The *National Intelligence Strategy 2023* emphasized the intelligence community must sustain its CI capabilities and expertise against espionage and other damaging intelligence activities conducted by our foreign adversaries.⁴

Who conducts DOD counterintelligence activities?

DOD CI activities are conducted in accordance with applicable statutes, Executive Order 12333, applicable DOD directives, instructions, agreements, and U.S. laws by CI elements (e.g., an organization, unit, office, or other group) that have successfully completed CI training and certification approved by the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security

(USD[I&S]), the Military Department Secretaries, or the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). DOD CI components include: the USD(I&S), DIA, the Military Service Department Counterintelligence Organizations (MDCO), Combatant Commands (CCMD), and select defense agencies. For the purpose of this fact sheet, the focus will be on the MDCOs, CCMDs, and the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency (DCSA).

MDCO: MDCOs are the Service Department's CI elements authorized to conduct Counter-intelligence investigations and operations. The MDCOs are the Office of Special Investigations (OSI) for the Air Force and Space Force, Army Counterintelligence Command



OSI



ACIC



NCIS

Counterintelligence

*is a sword and
a shield that
detects, identifies,
and protects the
Joint Force.*

(ACIC), and the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) for the Navy and Marine Corps. The Services provide the preponderance of DOD CI capacity and capabilities to the Department.

OSI and NCIS have both CI and law enforcement authorities and responsibilities for their respective services and sister services (Space Force and Marine Corps) respectively. This differs when compared to the Army. ACIC leverages and partners with the Army's Criminal Investigative Division for criminal investigative matters and crimes that do not have a CI nexus.

CCMD: Unified Combatant Commands (UCC), more commonly referred to as Combatant Commands, are joint military commands within the DOD, composed of units from two or more service branches of the U.S. Armed Forces, that conduct broad and continuing missions that promote effective and efficient cooperation between the uniformed services. There are currently 11 UCCs—seven geographically aligned and four functionally oriented (special operations, force projection, transport, and cybersecurity). Combatant Commanders are responsible for appointing a CI staff officer as the CI coordinator for the CCMD, coordinating with MDCOs to synchronize activities and assure unity of effort, and exercising command authority of assigned CI elements, except for CI investigations.

DCSA: DCSA is America's Gatekeeper, and the largest security agency in the federal government, dedicated to protecting America's trusted workforce and trusted

MISSION GOALS

- Industrial security
- Personnel security
- Counterintelligence & insider threat
- Security training



ENTERPRISE GOALS

- Talent
- Unity of effort
- Operational effectiveness
- Digital ecosystem
- Resourcing processes

workspaces. Through vetting, industry engagement, education, CI and insider threat support, the agency secures the trustworthiness of the USG's workforce, the integrity of its cleared contractor support, and the uncompromised nature of its technologies, services, and supply chains. The agency's goals are divided into Mission and Enterprise goals.

What are some contemporary foreign intelligence entity threats to DOD equities, interests, and activities?

The People's Republic of China (PRC), the Russian Federation, Iran, terrorism, and more are the existential threats facing the DOD and broader USG today. China, the nation's pacing challenge, continues to grow its global intelligence posture to advance the CCP's ambitions and challenge U.S. national security and global influence while stealing trade secrets and intellectual property to bolster China's indigenous science and technology sector. PRC espionage, influence operations, and intelligence collection activities far exceed DOD, USG interagency, intelligence community, and multinational ally/partner capacity to respond. Coupled with Russia's provocative intelligence collection activities in both the physical and virtual domains, DOD CI efforts merely scratch the surface of the proverbial iceberg of clandestine and covert activities that both the

National Security Crimes

Spying A foreign power who engages in secretly collecting information about the U.S. or DOD equities and/or interests.

Espionage The practice of spying or of using spies, typically by governments to obtain political or military information.

Terrorism The unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce individuals, governments, or societies in pursuit of terrorist goals.

Sabotage Deliberately destroying, damaging, or obstructing something, especially for political or military advantage.

Subversion The undermining of the power and authority of an established system or institution.

Sedition Conduct or speech inciting people to rebel against the authority of a state or monarch.

Treason The offense of attempting to overthrow the government of one's country or of assisting its enemies in war.

Assassination The willful killing, by a sudden, secret, or planned attack, of a person – especially if prominent or important.

PRC and Russia direct against the United States and its partners. Iran and its proxies remain a tenacious threat to the United States and its allies/interests in the region. Iran's growing expertise and willingness to conduct aggressive cyber operations makes it a major threat to U.S. and allied/partner networks and data security. The resurgence of the Islamic State and other violent extremist organizations (VEO) remains a clear reminder that despite the USG's rebalance toward strategic competition and integrated deterrence, the VEO threat to the homeland and overseas interests remains persistent. Lastly, the threat from foreign-controlled, co-opted, coerced, and/or exploited DOD insiders—those trusted personnel within the DOD—continues to cause grave national security damage from leaks; selling of information; technologies; and tactics, techniques, and procedures to America's strategic competitors and adversaries. SOF insiders like linguist [Mariam Taha Thompson](#), Army Special Forces Captain [Peter Rafael Dzubinski Debbins](#), Naval Special Warfare logistcian [Ye Sang "Ivy" Wang](#), Air Force officer [Robert Birchum](#), and countless other DOD CI insiders have betrayed America, the Department, the SOF enterprise, their fellow colleagues, and themselves for money, ideology, coercion, or ego.

What are some recent Department of Defense counterintelligence successes?

In early 2024 and throughout 2022 and 2023, DOD CI successes ranged from exposure of espionage on behalf of foreign nations and material support to terrorism to improper retention/

disclosure of classified national security information and technologies. The Army and Navy arrested a number of personnel (trusted insiders) committing espionage at the behest of the PRC. The Air Force fell victim to CI insider threats disclosing classified national security information in online dating websites and gaming forums. All personnel and their families must remain vigilant. Recognize, report, and protect SOF's competitive advantages!

How do U.S. SOF integrate or leverage counterintelligence capabilities?

In 2019, the momentum began building across the USG, including within the DOD, concerning CI reform and modernization efforts. January 2020 saw the publication of the *National Counterintelligence Strategy of the U.S.A. 2020-2022* by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. The DOD's efforts led to the establishment of the ACIC at the end of 2021 and significant increases in CI activities ranging from high-profile national security cases broadcast in the mainstream media to efforts to detect, identify, exploit, and neutralize FIE activities targeting DOD equities at home and abroad.

Even within the SOF enterprise, efforts were underway in 2020 to place a higher emphasis on CI integration and support to operations, activities, and investments while ensuring the protection of SOF's research, development, and acquisition of emerging technologies—critical to maintaining SOF's competitive advantage now and in the future. In 2022, U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) leadership placed a high priority on modernizing CI integration, support, and activities



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within the SOF enterprise—which led to the creation of the SOF CI Integration course taught at the Joint Special Operations University. In addition, USSOCOM updated policy, directives, and mandates to SOF components (SOF Service headquarters and Theater Special Operations Commands) to increase CI activities to mitigate risks across the Force caused by FIE targeting and exploitation of SOF equities. In 2023, in preparation for SOF Week, the USSOCOM Command Counterintelligence Coordinating Authority released a CI awareness and reporting program video to remind SOF personnel, vendors, and attendees of the FIE threat and ways to remain vigilant and report suspicious activities.⁵ Similarly, Christopher Costa, a USSOCOM Commando Hall of Fame inductee and Director of the International

Spy Museum, authored an article and conducted a Think JSOU interview advocating for SOF and CI integration within the “gray zone” in the modern strategic competition era to proactively counter and contest activities by FIE.⁶ Later that same year, the USSOCOM Communications Office published an article in the Tip of the Spear magazine reiterating the foreign intelligence threats to SOF and why CI integration is vital.⁷

CI integration is paramount for SOF to maintain its competitive advantage and continue to lead the Department at the tip of the spear in future operating environments. CI remains vigilant and postured to integrate offensive and defensive CI activities to **PROTECT, EXPLOIT, and NEUTRALIZE** the FIE threats to SOF, DOD, and USG equities and interests. [▲](#)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MICHAEL PARROTT serves as the Deputy Chief of Staff for a Joint Task Force. He is an accomplished former Special Operations intelligence management professional and CI subject matter expert with more than 25 years of experience, including 16+ years in SOF. He is a published author and also serves as an adjunct professor for the National Intelligence University (NIU) teaching special operations- and intelligence-related content. He recently published a chapter in a U.S. Army War College and NATO Centre of Excellence for Defense Against Terrorism book titled *Emerging Technologies and Terrorism: An American Perspective*. His other publications have appeared in the *Tip of the Spear*, the Simons Center’s *Interagency Journal*, and the MICA’s *Vanguard* journal. During his tenure as a JSOU Course Director, Parrott conducted interviews with national security, SOF, and intelligence professionals concerning a myriad of topics. His education includes a Master of Strategic Security Studies degree, a Bachelor in Homeland Security degree, an AAS in Intelligence Operations Studies, and an undergraduate Certificate in Terrorism Studies.

Counterintelligence Functions and Activities

Counterintelligence

Activities One or more of the CI functions of investigation, collection, functional service, analysis and production, and operations.

Investigations Formal investigative activities undertaken to determine whether a particular person is acting for, or on behalf of, a foreign power engaged in spying or committing espionage, sabotage, treason, sedition, subversion, assassinations, or international terrorist activities. Also an event related to such activities and to determine actions required to neutralize such acts.

Collections The systematic acquisition of intelligence information to answer CI collection requirements.

Functional Services CI activities conducted to support the four missions of CI that enable one or more of the other CI functions.

Analysis and Production

Analysis: The process of examining and evaluating information to determine the nature, function, interrelationships, personalities, and intent regarding the intelligence capabilities of an FIE.

Production: The creation of finished intelligence products incorporating CI analysis in response to known or anticipated customer CI concerns.

Operations Proactive activities designed to identify, deceive, exploit, disrupt, neutralize, or deter FIE activities.

LEARN MORE ABOUT COUNTERINTELLIGENCE

National CI and Security Center, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/ncsc-features/203-about/organization/national-counterintelligence-and-security-center?start=78>

“Counterintelligence & Insider Threat,” Defense CI and Security Agency (DCSA), <https://www.dcsa.mil/Counterintelligence-Insider-Threat/>

“Counterintelligence Awareness & Reporting Course for DOD,” CDSE - DCSA, <https://securityawareness.usalearning.gov/ciDOD/index.html>

National Insider Threat Task Force, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/ncsc-how-we-work/ncsc-nittf>

“CI News,” FBI, <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/counterintelligence/news>

Chinese Intelligence Operations, Shinobi Enterprises, <https://www.shinobienterprises.com/>

Counterintelligence Program for Industry and Academia, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/safeguarding-science/counterintelligence>

ThinkJSOU https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCL7hOd0ihWzmJlga_Y4wCJg

RECENT DOD COUNTERINTELLIGENCE ARRESTS

MARCH, 2024

U.S. Army Intelligence Analyst at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, was arrested and charged with conspiracy to obtain and disclose national defense information, export control violations, and bribery.

MARCH, 2024

U.S. Air Force employee indicted for unlawful disclosure of classified national defense information on a foreign online dating platform in 2022.

**OCTOBER, 2023/
JANUARY, 2024**

U.S. Navy Sailors charged for transmitting sensitive U.S. military information to Chinese intelligence.

**OCTOBER, 2023/
JANUARY, 2024**

Former Soldier indicted for attempting to pass national defense information to the People's Republic of China.

**SEPTEMBER,
2023**

U.S. Government contractor arrested on espionage charges.

JUNE, 2023

Former U.S. Air Force Reserve member sentenced to 27 months in prison for illegally exporting night vision goggles to Russia.

JUNE, 2023

Former U.S. Air Force intelligence officer sentenced to three years in prison for willfully retaining top secret information.

**APRIL, 2023/
MARCH, 2024**

U.S. Air National Guardsman pleaded guilty to unlawful retention transmission of classified national defense information on a social media platform from 2022-2023.

**SEPTEMBER,
2022**

Former National Security Agency employee arrested on espionage-related charges.

**SEPTEMBER,
2022**

U.S. Army Major indicted for allegedly providing confidential health information to a purported Russian representative to assist Russia in Ukraine conflict.

JUNE, 2022

Former U.S. Army pilot admits acting as paid agent of China and lying on national security background forms.

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Notes

1. Department of Defense, Directive 5240.02: *Counterintelligence* (May 16, 2018), 1.
2. Department of Defense, *Counterintelligence*, 1.
3. National Counterintelligence Strategy 2020–2022, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/ncsc-features/2741-the-national-counterintelligence-strategy-of-the-united-states-of-america-2020-2020>.
4. National Intelligence Strategy 2023, https://www.odni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/National_Intelligence_Strategy_2023.pdf.
5. Annual Threat Assessment 2024, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.
6. Christopher P. Costa, “The New Era of Counterintelligence Must Shift Focus to the Gray Zone,” *The Hill*, (February 23, 2023), <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/3870958-the-new-era-of-counterintelligence-must-shift-focus-to-the-gray-zone/>; Michael W. Parrott, “Counterintelligence and SOF in the Gray Zone,” interview with Colonel (Retired) Christopher Costa. ThinkJSOU, Joint Special Operations University, March 2023. Video, 1:27. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZkhxtv8ZME>
7. Michael W. Parrott, “Foreign Intelligence Threats to SOF—Why Counterintelligence Integration Is Vital,” *Tip of the Spear* (USSOCOM Communications Office, October 2023), <https://www.dvidshub.net/publication/issues/68487>

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