

IS THAT T-72 FRIENDLY?

RECOGNITION OF ROC-V IN THE EUCOM FIGHT

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With the rise of Short-Range Reconnaissance (SRR) and Medium-Range Reconnaissance (MRR) drones on the tactical battlefield in the European Command (EUCOM) area of responsibility (AOR), positive identification (PID) of combat vehicles has never been more important. As multinational operations in Eastern Europe expand, so does the presence of allied BMPs and T-72s. The result: increasing cases of misidentification and fratricide.

U.S. maneuver and fire support elements often mislabel Soviet-era vehicles as enemy simply because they appear familiar. Most Soldiers and drone operators are unfamiliar with the visual signatures of NATO-allied variants and lack theater-specific Recognition of Combat Vehicles (ROC-V) training for drone platforms.



BACKGROUND

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) continues to prioritize operations in Eastern Europe. As a result, more multinational partners from the former Soviet bloc now participate in Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) rotations. U.S. brigade combat teams (BCTs) frequently receive attachments from allied battalions or companies to enhance interoperability.

During Allied Spirit 25-01 at JMRC, a Lithuanian brigade commanded a U.S. cavalry squadron, a Lithuanian mechanized infantry battalion and a Czech armored troop. Friendly platforms included Infantry Squad Vehicles (ISVs), Joint Light Tactical Vehicles (JLTVs), Boxer Vilkas infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), T-72 main battle tanks (MBTs), BMPs and a variety of field artillery systems. Opposing forces (OPFOR) used a similar inventory of legacy T-72s and BMPs.

Throughout the rotation, U.S. forces misidentified Czech T-72s as enemy vehicles. Forward Observers (FOs) and rotary-wing elements

repeatedly targeted friendly armor. These incidents underscore a growing problem: Soldiers assume any Soviet-pattern vehicle is hostile.

THE ROC-V GAP

Vehicle identification is essential for executing the commander's intent, applying the correct attack guidance and conserving limited munitions. A SRR or MRR operator who can't distinguish enemy from friendly platforms cannot shape the fight.

Current doctrine places ROC-V training responsibility within the fire support community, particularly during Fire Support Team (FiST) certification.¹ However, with the battlefield flooded by sensors, all Soldiers, not just FOs, must develop proficiency in ROC-V.

Many NATO and partner nations still operate Soviet-era vehicles. They also procure legacy MBTs from Britain, Germany and Canada under NATO programs.



With increasing variety and overlap in vehicle signatures, it's no longer enough to rely on general familiarity. ROC-V must evolve into a theater-specific skillset. Units need updated enemy vehicle profiles tailored to their area of operations and disseminated before each mission.

DRONE-BASED MISIDENTIFICATION

The current ROC-V test outlined in TC 3-09.8 focuses on static, front and side-view images—often of poor quality—and doesn't reflect what SRR or MRR operators actually see. Operators rarely train to identify vehicles using the optical payload of their drones, especially in thermal settings.

During Combined Resolve 25-01, a TiC (Transformation in Contact) rotation at JMRC, 3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division experienced more than 40 misidentification incidents, including several friendly BTRs incorrectly reported as OPFOR.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Observer-coach/trainers (OCTs) recommend that all SRR and MRR operators attend a ROC-V course tailored to drone-based imagery, including day and night optics. This training must cover visual discrimination of turrets, hull shapes and wheel configurations—key identifiers for MBTs, IFVs and field artillery assets.

Additionally, units should develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) that require a second set of eyes before initiating fires based on drone observations. Units currently lack internal checks, leading to single-operator PID without confirmation.

Too often, SRR and MRR operators report only what they see—"one BTR"—without context. But a lone BTR likely belongs to a reconnaissance element. That detail could shape the commander's understanding of the enemy's scheme of maneuver.

[1] Army Training Circular (TC) 3-09.8, Fire Support and Field Artillery Certification and Qualification, March 2020.



Intelligence sections (S2) may assess enemy approach routes based on prior reports. If a SRR or MRR operator observes enemy armor maneuvering in a different sector, that could shift tactical priorities or redirect friendly security assets. Operators must understand their role in building the enemy order of battle, not just observing isolated targets.

LIMITS OF AI IN VEHICLE IDENTIFICATION

Artificial intelligence (AI) offers potential, but it remains unreliable. During recent JMRC rotations, units that relied on AI-based tools for vehicle identification found they could only distinguish general categories like "tracked" or "wheeled"—not MBTs, IFVs or national origin.

Commanders should not rely on automation for PID. Instead, they must build trained human teams capable of applying ROC-V principles under stress.

A PROVEN TTP: TEAMED OBSERVATION

A proven technique involves pairing SRR and MRR operators with FOs or collocating drone teams with company FiSTs. These observers can validate the target and provide tactical context to commanders, translating sensor data into fire support recommendations.

As sensors proliferate, this teamed approach will help synchronize fires and intelligence operations.

CONCLUSION

Accurate vehicle recognition is essential to achieving effects in a multinational environment. As NATO allies field more legacy platforms, fratricide risk rises without targeted ROC-V training.

Units must modernize ROC-V instruction, contextualize drone-based observation and build verification steps into the kill chain. Success in the EUCOM fight depends not only on sensors, but on the trained eyes behind them.



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