Eyes on the Horizon: Honing Counter Drone Skills in Eastern Europe

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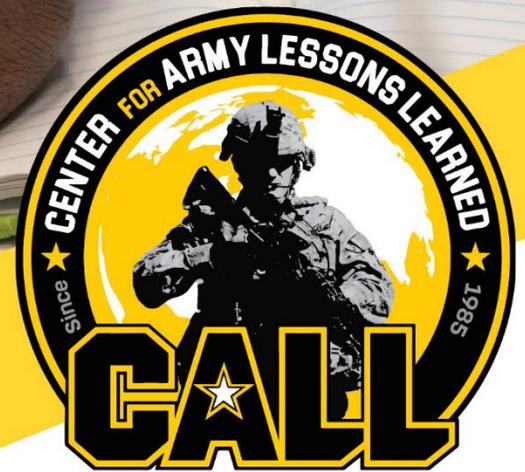
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"In a situation where seconds determine survival, C-sUAS training isn't just preparation, it's a measurement of readiness. We must be ready to counter the evolving threat of unmanned systems…to dominate the skies."- 173rd IBCT (A) UAS subject matter expert.

Introduction

Observations from the Russia-Ukraine War have revealed emergent tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) in the employment of small-unmanned aircraft systems (sUAS), which have proliferated across the battle space. Russian sUAS have become a significant and persistent factor in protection considerations for Eastern European nations, particularly bordering Ukraine. The rapid employment of sUAS compresses the decision-making cycle to mere seconds, rendering traditional centralized air defense approval processes ineffective at the tactical edge. Consequently, the training environment in future U.S. Army Europe and Africa exercises must replicate the compressed decision cycles and complex threat environments seen in Eastern Europe, ensuring tactical leaders have both the tools and the authority to act decisively.

Numerous drone incursions from the Russia-Ukraine War have spilled over into neighboring countries.[1] These incursions have heightened concerns over unexploded ordnance (UXO), particularly in Moldova's southern regions: Cahul, Lăpușna, and Tighina which are near the Ukraine border. UXO threats in these regions raise concerns about public safety and regional security. These challenges and concerns are not unique to Moldova but are prevalent across NATO's Eastern Flank Deterrence Line[2], underscoring the need for enhanced counter small-unmanned aircraft systems (C-sUAS) capabilities and regional collaboration.   This publication provides insights on how U.S. Army Europe and Africa (USAREUR-AF) units plan and execute C-sUAS training along with lessons learned from exercise Fire Shield '25 executed in Moldova in August 2025.

Background

USAREUR-AF leadership plans to conduct C-sUAS activities in exercises to build readiness with subordinate units, integrate emergent technologies, and exchange best practices with Allies and partners. However, host nation legal frameworks governing radio frequency (RF) jamming often constrain full replication of real-world, non-kinetic defeat operations across many established training areas in Western Europe during peace time. Partner nations, like Moldova, that formerly belonged to the U.S.S.R.[3], are optimum locations to conduct C-sUAS training because of drone incursion threats that bleed over from the Russia-Ukraine War. These threats have created a regulatory

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[1] World News, "Russian drones crash in Moldova and Romania as airspace violations are reported overnight," Associated Press, https://apnews.com/article/romania-moldova-russia-drones-1ac57e8270ff8bb62320773bea5af933 (accessed 11 August 25)

[2] Judson, Jen, "Army Europe chief unveils NATO eastern flank defense plan," Defense News https://www.defensenews.com/land/2025/07/16/army-europe-chief-unveils-nato-eastern-flank-defense-plan/ (accessed 11 August 25)

[3] U.S.S.R. is an abbreviation for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, commonly known as the Soviet Union from 1922 until it dissolved in 1991.

environment that allows C-sUAS equipment to operate and a host nation appetite for electronic warfare (EW) focused training. As a result, the 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne) partnered with the 2nd Moldovan Brigade to conduct C-sUAS training as part of the Moldovan annual exercise Fire Shield '25 from 4-14 August 2025 at the Bulboaca Training Area in Moldova.

Key Terms & Definitions:

Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS): A system whose components include the necessary equipment, network, and personnel to control an unmanned aircraft. UAS is controlled remotely through a specific data link. An unmanned aircraft (UA) can fly autonomously or remotely. UAS is the totality of everything that makes up a UA platform including its position, navigation, and timing (PNT) module, ground control module, transmission systems, camera, all software, and the operator on the ground controlling the UAS.[4]

Small Unmanned Aircraft System (sUAS): For the purposes of this publication, the term sUAS refers to Group 1-3 UAS as defined in *ATP -3-01.81 Counter Unmanned Aircraft Systems Operations*, Table 1-1. Group 1 UAS consist mostly of hand-launched radio-controlled platforms. Due to construction, range, cost, and operation, these UAS may be operated using launch and forget tactics. These tactics allow one operator to conduct limited intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations. Adding weapons to these platforms is possible and can provide significant effects for the adversary. More weight, however, will change the range of the aircraft, significantly reducing its effectiveness. These Group 1 platforms are most capable of ISR gathering tasks. Group 2 and 3 UAS are larger than micro and mini UAS. They are relatively small airframes constructed of lightweight materials. The increased size, range, and load bearing

Table 1-1. Unmanned aircraft system groups

Group	Weight (lbs)	Speed (kts)	Normal Operating Altitudes	Notes	Threat & COTS Examples	Friendly Examples
Group 1: micro/mini UAS	0 - 20	<100	< 1,200 AGL	Generally, hand launched, possibly commercial-off-the-shelf, radio-controlled platforms. They have limited ranges and small payload capabilities. They offer real time video. Operated within line of sight of the user.	DJI MAVIC, Enterprise Dual	RQ-11 Raven
Group 2: small tactical UAS	21 - 55	101 - 250	< 3,500 AGL	Small airframes with low radar cross sections provide medium range and endurance. Launched from unimproved areas with a small number of people involved. Typically line of sight to the ground control station.	SKY-09Ps	Scan Eagle
Group 3: Tactical UAS	56 – 1,320		< 18,000 AGL	Similar to Group 1 and 2 UAS, requires a larger logistical footprint. Range and endurance vary significantly among platforms.	Shahed 136	RQ-7B Shadow
Group 4: Strategic or theater UAS	> 1,320	Any speed	< AGL 18,000	Relatively large systems operated at medium to high altitudes. This group has extended range and endurance capabilities. Normally requires a runway for launch and recovery.	Forpost	MQ-1C Gray Eagle MQ-1A/B Predator
Group 5: Strategic UAS	> 1,320	Any speed	> AGL 18,000	Operates at medium to high altitudes having the greatest range, endurance, and airspeed. Requires large logistical footprint like that of manned aircraft and has a suite of optics for targeting and weaponry for engagements.	Wing Loong II	RQ-4 Global Hawk MQ-9 Reaper

AGL above ground level   COTS Commercial off the shelf   Kts Knots   UAS unmanned aircraft system
lbs pounds

Table 1-1. Unmanned aircraft system groups. (ATP 3-01.81, May 2025)

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[4]Army Training Publication (ATP) 3-01.81, *Counter Unmanned Aircraft System (C-UAS) Operations,* Headquarters Department of the U.S. Army (May 2025).

capacity of these larger UASs enable a wide range of mission and payload capabilities. This increases threat capability well beyond normal ISR operations.[5]

First Person View (FPV) Drone: A drone operated by a pilot relying on a live video feed from the drone to a mounted display on the ground station controller or in a headset.

Establishing the C-sUAS Training Environment

The training environment must be established once the training area is selected, which is accomplished through nine key actions:
1. Host nation permissions
2. Host nation agreements
3. Integrate stakeholders into planning
4. Identify sUAS and C-sUAS systems to be used
5. Select the training site
6. Submit spectrum requests
7. Deconflict air space
8. Establish real-world C-sUAS force protection measures
9. Coordinate Sustainment

1. Host nation permissions: Once the country for training is selected, the host nation must agree to host U.S. forces conducting C-sUAS training, and a designated point of contact for the training should be identified as a "single face to the customer" for ease of coordination.

2. Host nation agreements: Prior to conducting training in host nations, it is imperative that legal and regulatory frameworks are established. As a vignette, during Exercise Fire Shield '25, U.S. forces encountered real world drone incursions on the base by unknown actors. These incursions focused on barracks facilities hosting U.S. servicemembers and highlight the potential for threat to force and the need for established and vetted rules of engagement in instances of self-defense. Host nation agreements must address key legal and regulatory considerations, including:
- Airspace Management:
  - Clear guidelines for the use of airspace during C-sUAS training must be established to prevent interference with civilian or military aviation.
  - Coordination with host nation aviation authorities ensures compliance with local laws and minimizes risks during training exercises.
- Spectrum Allocation:

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[5]Army Training Publication (ATP) 3-01.81, *Counter Unmanned Aircraft System (C-UAS) Operations,* Headquarters Department of the U.S. Army (May 2025). para 1-9, 1-10.

- o C-sUAS systems rely on specific frequencies for detection and defeat mechanisms. Host nation agreements must include provisions for electromagnetic spectrum management to avoid conflicts with local communication networks.
- Intelligence Sharing:
  - o Agreements should facilitate the exchange of intelligence on potential threats and environmental factors to include adversarial drone activity that could present risks to force and mission. Intelligence sections should coordinate with the partnering nation to enhance situational awareness of the environment.
- Mutual Defense Agreement (MDA) for C-sUAS:
  - o An MDA is a formal arrangement between U.S. and the host nation that allows U.S. forces to operate in the host nation under clearly defined conditions of mutual defense against C-sUAS threats, through electronic or kinetic means or both. This arrangement can be specific to a certain timeframe, a defined event, and/or type of sUAS countermeasures to be used.[6]

- Rules of Engagement (ROE)
  - o The chain of command must articulate and legally review ROE for U.S. forces to be able to better determine a threat and know how, when, and where to engage.
  - o U.S. forces always reserve the right to self-defense. However, defining what constitutes a sUAS threat can be challenging as legitimate civilian sUASs can operate near host nation military installations.
  - o Rules of engagement are directives issued by competent military authority that delineate circumstances and limitations under which U.S. forces will initiate and/or continue combat engagement with other forces encountered.[7]
- Customs
  - o Clear requirements for personnel, vehicles, armaments, ammunition, hazardous material and equipment must be articulated, to include required paperwork, timelines for submissions, and key points of contact.
  - o The U.S. Embassy military operations section is a critical link for customs between a host nation's Ministry of Defense and border control elements.

3. Integration of C-sUAS stakeholders into planning: An effective best practice employed by the 173rd Airborne Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) was the integration of their C-sUAS working group into the planning and execution phases. This group provided critical input on system compatibility, operational constraints, and

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[6] Defense Security Cooperation Agency, "Security Assistance Management Manual," U.S. Department of Defense, https://samm.dsca.mil/chapter/chapter-1#C1.1. (accessed 11 August 2025) Host nation mutual defense agreements are part of security cooperation activities and are governed by U.S. Department of Defense's Security Assistance Management Manual.
[7] Joint Publication 1-04, *Legal Support to Military Operations*, GL-3, U.S. Department of Defense (August 2011).

training objectives. At a minimum, input should be provided by representatives from the following unit elements:

- CEMA (Cyber Electronic Magnetic Activities): To address electromagnetic spectrum management and ensure compatibility of detection systems.
- ADAM (Air Defense Airspace Management) / BAE (Brigade Aviation Element): To provide airspace management expertise and deconflict airspace for safe operations.
- UAS Master Trainer[8]: To oversee the integration of sUAS and C-sUAS systems into the training plan.

Appointing a liaison to address technical and logistical requirements for integrating U.S. systems with partner-nation systems is essential to ensure interoperability and reduce risk.

Recommended Russia-Ukraine informed resource: *(CUI) Small-Unit Leader's Guide to Unmanned Aircraft Systems Integration, September 2025.*
Source: https://armyeitaas.sharepoint-mil.us/sites/TR-CAC-CACT-CALL

4. Identify sUAS and C-sUAS systems to be used: For a platoon-sized element (est. 35–40 personnel, U.S. and/or with partner forces), a minimum of four complete C-sUAS detection systems and four defeat systems is recommended to ensure simultaneous, distributed training across multiple training lanes. Adequate allocation allows for both organic training capability at the squad echelon and rotation through various systems to build cross-platform familiarity.

5. Select the training site: For effective platoon-level C-sUAS training, a training area of at least three-square kilometers is needed. The terrain used in Moldova was largely open terrain with rolling hills and dispersed urban features. During this exercise, it was found an optimal area would incorporate varied terrain and structures to replicate both open and complex environments. The inclusion of urban features, tree lines, and open fields enhances realism for detection and defeat operations. Ideal terrain allows for opportunities to test detection beyond the line of sight. If kinetic C-sUAS capabilities are used, ranges may be required, and surface danger zones must be identified.

6. Submit spectrum requests: Submitting spectrum requests is critical to ensure U.S. forces can effectively monitor, detect, analyze, and respond to unauthorized activity within information networks and systems. The electromagnetic spectrum is the backbone of modern communication, enabling computers, radios, and networks to transport information for both offensive and defensive operations. In large-scale combat operations, this electromagnetic spectrum becomes a contested and chaotic domain,

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[8] U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence at Fort Benning, "Small Unmanned Aircraft System Master Trainer (SUAS) Course", https://www.benning.army.mil/Armor/316thCav/SUASMT/ (accessed 11 August 2025). The U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence at Fort Benning offers a three-week course focused on the development of personnel to serve as a unit master trainer with the responsibility of training and certifying operators, advising leaders on the techniques, procedures and employment of Army Group 1 Small Unmanned aircraft in unit level training and combat operations.   This course is conducted at Fort Benning or at other U.S. military installations that host a mobile training team (MTT).

where frequency interference can disrupt mission success. Host nation coordination is essential to identify frequency bands used for military and non-military purposes, such as emergency services. It cannot be stressed enough that Spectrum Managers play a vital role in overseeing the electromagnetic spectrum, resolving interference issues, and ensuring freedom of movement through the electromagnetic spectrum. To ensure efficient use of the spectrum, frequency requests should be sent to the unit communication representative as a Spectrum Access Request (SAR) at least 75 calendar days before a planned training event.

7. Deconflict air space: Airspace deconfliction is a vital element in preparing the training site, ensuring safety and operational effectiveness. Early coordination with host nation authorities is essential to secure permissions and establish restricted zones for training activities. Detailed flight plans and operational requirements should be completed no later than 60 days prior to training, with arrangements made to validate flight paths for all training lanes. To ensure clarity and precision, graphic aids should be developed to define training area boundaries, altitude limits, and no-fly zones. This approach allows for the simultaneous use of multiple lanes and sectors without interference, maximizing the efficiency and realism of the training environment.

Airspace deconfliction is a strategic necessity that can transform C-sUAS training into an operationally relevant exercise. By integrating airspace deconfliction as a core component of training, organizations can prepare participants to manage complex airspace scenarios that mirror real-world challenges. One critical aspect is the management of liminal space. Liminal space is the transitional zone where controlled and uncontrolled environments intersect, such as urban-rural interfaces, the edges of restricted airspace, or areas where civilian and military air traffic, or types of aircraft platforms overlap. These ambiguous spaces demand rapid decision-making and adaptive strategies from commanders and their staff.

Recommended Russia-Ukraine informed resource: *(U) Small Unmanned Aircraft System Airspace Management and Control: A Handbook for Army Leaders, September 2025.*
Source: https://armyeitaas.sharepoint-mil.us/sites/TR-CAC-CACT-CALL

8. Establish Real-World C-sUAS Force Protection Measures:
This is the real-world application of step 2 (MDA and ROE) put into action with U.S. and host nation forces and assets. This may be different depending on location and resources available. It is recommended that this is rehearsed and shared at the appropriate classification.

9. Coordinating Sustainment:
Units coordinate sustainment by defining logistical requirements, selecting an effective and efficient acquisition strategy, and choosing operational approaches to resolve emergent requirements
- Requirements for each class of supply and field services include
  - Food and Water
  - Training Aids
  - Administrative Supplies
  - Lubricants and Fuel

- Construction Materials
- Targetry
- Ammunition (if kinetic)
- Ammunition Storage Site
- Vehicles
- Armaments / Weaponry
- Medical Treatment
- Casualty evacuation
- Repair parts
- Lodging or Tentage
- Material Handling Equipment (MHE)
- Bathrooms or Chemical Toilets
- Sinks or Handwashing Stations
- Linguists (if needed)
- Waste (General and Medical)
- Electricity (Charging Batteries)
- Power Generation and/or Charging Stations
- Plug Adapters (if not 110v).
- Showers (if needed)

- The acquisition strategy is critical to ensure cost-effectiveness and requirements are fulfilled at the right place at the right time. The acquisition strategy is decided early in the exercise planning cycle prior to the training.   In Europe there are four different acquisition methodologies used prior to training execution; Unit supplied, host nation provided, contracting, and third-party logistics.

- For exercises in Europe, there are two approaches planned and coordinated prior to execution used to resolve emergent requirements.
  - Unit Field Ordering Officer (FOO) and Pay Agent
  - Unit credit card

Implement a C-sUAS Training Methodology

During Fire Shield '25, personnel took part in a five-day C-sUAS training event designed to enhance technical knowledge, operational proficiency, and interoperability in detecting and defeating sUAS threats. Training was delivered through a combination of classroom instruction, hands-on familiarization, and scenario-based situational exercises.

The training progression is outlined below:

- Days 1–2: Foundational Knowledge and UAS Familiarization: Instruction focused on fundamental UA system characteristics, with emphasis on frequency and power considerations. Threat tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) were reviewed in detail to develop threat recognition and situational awareness. Practical training included team-based UA flight operations, enabling participants to apply theoretical knowledge in a controlled environment.

- Day 3: C-sUAS Detection and Tactical Employment: Participants were introduced to C-sUAS detection system capabilities. Training covered sensor employment in both fixed and mobile site configurations, emphasizing the need for a layered defense which incorporates both passive and active measures.

Day 4: Radio Frequency (RF) Detection and Non-kinetic Defeat Systems:

Instruction addressed RF detection technologies and their role in threat identification. Hands-on familiarization and operational drills with non-kinetic defeat systems were conducted in a fixed-site training environment to establish operator proficiency. Students were given the opportunity to train on both U.S. and Moldovan (host nation) systems.

- Day 5: Capstone Exercise: The final day consisted of a full-scale capstone exercise. Squads conducted dismounted patrol operations under realistic conditions, integrating detection and defeat operations against sUAS threats. Engagements were executed using organic equipment, partner nation systems, and mixed-platform configurations. Teams operated both as national elements and integrated mixed squads to validate interoperability and cross-platform integration.

Outcome: C-sUAS is essential for survival on the modern battlefield. The training effectively increased participants' technical understanding, tactical capability, and readiness to conduct C-sUAS operations in diverse operational environments in a combined environment. The event also strengthened multinational interoperability, enabling integration of varied systems and tactics in a unified mission framework. In future conflicts units must rely on allied and partner nation equipment and have an understanding of combined protection.

Lessons Learned

1. Observation: Commercial off-the shelf (COTS) systems may not perform reliably in training areas outside of the U.S. if reliant on civilian infrastructure due to differences in communications, frequency regulations, and accessible technology.

Discussion: During Fire Shield '25, the U.S. Army fixed-site COTS s-UAS detection system used were unable to integrate with Moldovan network cell carriers. Consequently, no detection or live updates were available to build a sUAS common operating picture. This gap could affect force protection for expeditionary U.S. forces and limit advanced warning of threat sUAS's.

Recommendation: Conduct pre-deployment interoperability testing with host nation civilian networks to identify gaps, and secure agreements for C-sUAS equipment authorization prior to training. Develop contingency TTPs for operations without reliable network connectivity.

2. Observation: The existing doctrine under ATP 3-01.81 does not offer clear guidance about engagement decisions for C-sUAS at the squad, platoon, or company level, leading to hesitation and delays during live threats.

Discussion: Current C-sUAS doctrine does not adequately address engagement authority, which is essential for tactical echelons to effectively respond in contested environments. Leaders at these levels must be empowered to detect and defeat sUAS threats within the limited window of opportunity available. ATP 3-01.81, which addresses all classes of UAS, states that the battle drill for responding to threat UAS is driven by a Spot report[9]. However, this approach is unrealistic in the context of sUAS

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[9] Direct Observation. A Spot report in the Army is a concise, immediate report used to convey essential information regarding events that could significantly impact current and future operations. It is typically sent by military units to their higher headquarters to report intelligence or status updates. The report includes critical details such as the date and time of the event, and it is designed to provide timely information that may require information.

173rd IBCT (A) soldier conducts C-sUAS training in Bulboaca, Moldova on 10 August, 2025.
Picture by SSG Christopher Osburn.

threats. A quadcopter or FPV drone can reach its target within 30–60 seconds of detection moving at 100+ miles per hour, leaving little time for centralized clearance chains that squander critical seconds. Reliance on Spot reports is impractical in this compressed timeline. Leaders at the tactical edge must have pre-authorized engagement authority and standardized "React to sUAS" drills.

Recommendation: Incorporate a battle drill into ATP 3-01.81 for immediate, decentralized engagement decisions at the lowest level. Ensure training events rehearse detection, decision-making, defeat, and reporting in under 60 seconds.

3. Observation: Fire Shield '25 showed potential for expanding C-sUAS planning into the deep fight. Current doctrine insufficiently addresses sUAS threats in deep and operational support zones**.**

Discussion: Traditional battlefield air interdiction (BAI) doctrine (FM 3-03, ATP 3-09.32) focuses on manned aircraft and missile systems conducting deep strike operations to disrupt enemy forces before they engage in close combat. Adversary UAS and sUAS are now integrated into this same function and can produce effects for a fraction of the

A soldier from the 2nd BDE, Moldovan Defense forces launches a small UAS during C-sUAS training in Bulboaca, Moldova on 10 August, 2025. Picture by SSG Christopher Osburn.

price and limited risk to manpower. These systems are used for ISR to locate advancing formations, directing artillery strikes, or delivering kinetic payloads against maneuvering units, logistics nodes, and high-value assets well beyond the forward edge of the battle area (FEBA).

ATP 3-01.81 addresses close and base defense threats but lacks a framework for identifying, prioritizing, and engaging sUAS BAI threats in the deep and operational support zones. No current FM or NATO equivalent fully integrates C-sUAS measures into the deep fight as a standard planning consideration. Field Manual 3-0, *U.S. Army Air and Missile Defense Operations* (December 2020), and ATP 3-01.81 must be expanded to incorporate "Counter-BAI UAS" as a mission set to address the emerging threat of sUAS on the battlefield. Best practices to incorporate in training scenarios include staff considerations and planning for detection of low-signature UAS operating beyond the FEBA. Additionally, integration of counter-BAI drone defense into air defense and airspace management/ brigade air element (ADAM/BAE) cell planning for deep and operational support zones.

Recommendation: Expand ATP 3-01.81 to include "Counter-BAI UAS" as a mission set. Include detection and defeat of low-signature UAS in deep-zone planning at echelon. Train ADAM/BAE cells to integrate counter-BAI measures into operations.

Conclusion

NATO and partner nations are facing an increasing threat from drone incursions and must urgently scale their C-sUAS readiness. Exercise Fire Shield 25 highlighted the critical importance of building multinational C-sUAS capabilities tailored to the realities of the modern battlefield. Effective defense against sUAS requires more than technical proficiency; it demands interoperable systems, rapid engagement authority, and the integration of counter-drone measures across all operations, from close-area defense to deep-zone interdiction. Future training environments must replicate the compressed decision cycles seen in Eastern Europe, equipping tactical leaders with the necessary tools and authority to act decisively. To stay ahead of evolving sUAS threats, exercises like Fire Shield '25 must continue to evolve, expanding beyond traditional boundaries and across echelons.

The proliferation of sUAS demands a fundamental shift in how units approach maneuver and force protection. C-sUAS is no longer a supplementary consideration but a foundational requirement for survival. Units that fail to prioritize and integrate C-sUAS into their planning and training risk operating in contested airspace, vulnerable to ISR, fires, and EW, making maneuver a potentially suicidal act. Fire Shield '25 established a foundation, but these efforts must be scaled and replicated. C-sUAS training must be ingrained in all future FTXs and interoperability exercises, becoming a core competency

for U.S. and NATO forces. Furthermore, C-sUAS considerations must be integrated into CPXs to ensure leaders and staff are prepared to manage complex airspace and dynamically allocate resources in response to evolving sUAS threats.