



In case you missed it, vehicle identification training recently took on an added emphasis. It used to be that during the “good old days” of the Cold War, our trigger-pulling gunners and pilots relied mostly on the shape of things to guide their decisions to fire or not to fire. If the turret looked like a frying pan and the vehicle were over on the other side of the FEBA, it was fair game. Target ID was easier in those days because there were basically two sets of equipment, NATO stuff (no kill), and Warsaw pact stuff (kill), and everything was shaped differently — those weird-shaped French vehicles notwithstanding.

That was then. Now, it is not so easy to discriminate good and bad, and it is getting more difficult by the day. Despite thermal and passive sights, deciding who is inside that shape your high velocity cannon is pointing at — a good guy or a bad guy — is the rub. Fratricide and near-fratricide incidents in Desert Storm certainly helped us relearn that target identification is a tough task. Complicating the identification task was the fact that, in this coalition war, some of our coalition partners’ equipment was shaped the same as that of our enemy. All T-72s were not alike. We probably will never again see the Cold War battlefields, where almost everyone was on the correct side of the line and pointing in the proper direction.

A recent addition to this battlefield complication is South Korea’s apparent decision to accept Russian military hardware, 30 or so T-80U tanks, as partial payment for development loans. One is hard-pressed to think of a more staunch ally in our recent history than the South Koreans. However, even they are going to have some equipment that looks an awful lot like what our training usually tells us is manned by the enemy. However, this isn’t the only

case of NATO and Russian equipment — once the standard used to tell foes apart — now coexisting in the same motor pools. Other potential coalition partners also are diversifying their equipment sources. Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates both field numbers of BMP-3s. Again staunch allies with equipment resembling that of other less-friendly states.

We have every reason to expect that, for both business and political reasons, some of the huge surpluses of lethal, ex-Soviet military hardware, as well as new-built equipment, will end up in the armories of other friendly nations. Russian fighter aircraft regularly make the short list of potential planes in air forces on nearly every continent. Even our next-door neighbor, Mexico, seriously considered adopting MI-17s as their future transport helicopters.

Given these realities and our observations and lessons learned in the Gulf War, the necessity of getting spoof-proof IFF (identification friend or foe) materiel into the hands of our ground forces and on their vehicles takes on greater importance than before. Look at John Sack’s book, *Company C: The Real War in Iraq*, to see the extraordinary and dysfunctional effort exerted at the lower unit level to avoid blue-on-blue engagement. The challenges posed by blue-on-gray engagements are even more enormous. We need hardware that we can loan to our coalition partners. We need to stress exact vehicle ID. Gone forever are the days of kill/no kill answers. Situational awareness, coupled with sound knowledge of vehicle types, what they look like in day, at night, from the front, back, side, and through thermal sights, is the only way to keep from killing ourselves and our friends.

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