



# An Interview with Michael E. Langley

*Joint Force Quarterly: With the national focus on pacing and acute challenges in other theaters, how is the African continent strategic terrain for today's joint force?*

**General Langley:** It is an honor to convey the USAFRICOM message in

this publication; *Joint Force Quarterly* is an important forum for strategic discussion.

Africa is both key strategic and geopolitical terrain due to its physical geography, wealth of resources, and fast-growing populations. These attributes make Africa an increasingly contested environment as strategic competitors, violent extremist organizations [VEOs], and transnational criminal organizations

collectively seek to exploit African nations for their gain. At the same time, African nations are facing new challenges that threaten to destabilize already fragile democracies. Climate change is increasing desertification, causing crop failures, and increasing tensions between historic herding and farming communities. VEOs are expanding and taking advantage of ungoverned spaces while strategic competitors exploit natural resources. The lack of good governance and the humanitarian crisis created by interstate conflicts results in migration that transnational criminal organizations exploit for human trafficking and other sources of profit. The lack of stability in Africa puts pressure on our allies and partners, causing them to focus time and resources on NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]'s southern flank at a time when those resources are needed to support challenges in other theaters.

*JFQ: Based on this assessment of the strategic importance of Africa, how does a commander in a posture-limited theater balance the need for resources to meet the Command's priorities within the globally integrated construct?*

**General Langley:** DOD [Department of Defense] has a prioritization process for resource allocation that is aligned to match NDS [National Defense Strategy] priorities. With that said, the pool of DOD resources is increasingly limited because of the Service modernization and future readiness required to meet pacing and acute threats. From my perspective, the threats posed by strategic competition, transnational crime, and VEOs in Africa are growing in lethality and expanding across the continent, requiring both an expanded posture and increased resourcing to limit and prevent further spread.

USAFRICOM's campaign plan relies on a whole-of-government, "3D" approach—diplomacy, development, defense—to partner engagement. We use an African-led, U.S.-enabled framework to conduct operations focused on shared security challenges. Helping countries

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Nigerian navy and police force personnel conduct visit, board, search, and seizure training during exercise Obangame Express 2023, in Lagos, Nigeria, January 25, 2023 (U.S. Navy/Andrea Rumble)

solve their security challenges, working through established regional frameworks, promotes stability.

Our limited posture means that we rely on allies and partners as regional security exporters. USAFRICOM does not give our African partners us-or-them ultimatums; Africa needs partners of all kinds, especially for investment and infrastructure.

In West Africa, we are working an initiative called the Combined Joint Interagency Coordination Group–West Africa that seeks both to utilize countries’ existing intelligence structures and to build sharing pathways to enable regional security. Coupled with some key security cooperation funding, we think building these types of partner-led, regional approaches to security will make headway

on preventing the spread of VEOs into the littorals and combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing in the Gulf of Guinea.

I think that senior leadership in the State Department, DOD, and Congress recognizes the strategic importance of Africa and that they will take that into account when they make tough resourcing decisions.

*JFQ: At a year in command, what have you learned and how have your views and approaches to Africa changed, and how have they remained the same?*

**General Langley:** I’ve referred to my first year in command as my “campaign of learning,” and after many trips to

the continent and engagements with African leaders, I think the most important thing I have learned is the importance of being a good partner. African countries want to be our partner; they want America present in their countries standing by their side helping them work through their problems. They want African solutions to African problems, enabled by U.S. training and resources for the areas where we share congruency with them.

The more I learn about the diversity and complexity of Africa, the more I appreciate the wealth of issues these countries must deal with. We need to help African countries move toward good governance, which is *the* key to stability. That’s what America needs in Africa to deter our strategic competitors. Good



governance doesn't come from military security cooperation, although the more we can decrease the VEO threat the better it enables countries to focus on governing their people. The interagency community must work together to achieve unified action in Africa, and how to do that is the thing I continue to focus on learning and teaching to my staff at USAFRICOM.

I've learned that no crises are ever the same in Africa. We need to be resourced to respond to a variety of issues from support for pandemics and disease outbreaks to challenges to democracy and humanitarian relief.

*JFQ: On the topic of defense diplomacy, how is USAFRICOM reinforcing Department of State country plans for diplomacy and development? Does that effort*

*include the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)?*

**General Langley:** Through our 3D [diplomacy, development, defense] approach, USAFRICOM is lashed tight with the interagency community. In Africa, USAFRICOM honestly plays a supporting role to interagency efforts. The chiefs of mission in our Embassies across the continent are the ones calling the shots and setting the pace on security support. The nature of that support is diverse because it must be tailored to over 50 nations with unique needs and political environments.

Every time I travel to a country in Africa, my first stop is to meet with the Country Team at the Embassy. I engage constantly with our Ambassadors and senior officials in the State Department so that we can speak with one voice. We also

welcomed Ambassador Robert Scott to the team this summer as my new deputy for civil and military affairs. He brings a wealth of experience to the staff, and I rely on his knowledge and connections with the State Department as we work through the complexities of understanding the variety of African engagements.

I appreciate that you mentioned USAID because otherwise I would have. They are a key interagency partner. The security challenges facing Africa run deep, and military solutions don't get at the root of issues such as governance, infrastructure, jobs, education, and food and water security. For example, USAFRICOM regularly supports Somali soldiers in the field against al-Shabaab, but it's USAID that comes in and really makes sustainable, practical improvements to people's lives. It is only by combining USAID's development effort

with the State Department's diplomacy along with USAFRICOM's defense enablers that will give viable support to Somalia and all our African partners.

*JFQ: In recent years, several African countries have experienced military coups or democratic backsliding. How does USAFRICOM reinforce the ideals of democracy, civilian governance, and human rights?*

**General Langley:** This is a timely question, given the events unfolding in Niger and Gabon. I am honest with our African partners; democracy takes time and it's hard. However, democracy is the only system that codifies the rights and freedoms of the people, by the people, and for the people. When African military officers attend our schools, they see firsthand what right looks like for civilian control of the military. These officers need to exercise tactical and strategic patience and allow the rest of their whole of government to come online and to reach the full advantages and endstates of democracy. I use this as part of my narrative in all engagements and reinforce that coups will never achieve the freedom and prosperity that these countries so desperately desire.

*JFQ: What is your vision for USAFRICOM interaction with neighboring geographic combatant commands, including U.S. Space Command [USSPACECOM]?*

**General Langley:** We have strong relationships with all the functional combatant commands regardless of whether they are our geographic neighbors or not. Globally integrated operations are a team event, and we must work together to achieve common goals.

Since Africa straddles the geographic seams of four other commands, it's important that we understand how Africa fits into their operations. There are politically powerful issues, such as migration and transnational crime, that occur in Africa but affect Europe.

Strategic competitor activities like illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and exploitation of natural resources have implications in the Pacific. We share posture locations and resources with our fellow commands and over time have developed agreements that support equitable sharing and teaming, especially to get after seam issues. For example, we have shared intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance with USEUCOM [U.S. European Command] throughout the Ukraine crisis as the I&W [indications and warning] they provide on Russian activities informs our campaign in Africa.

The embedded LNOs [liaison officers] from USSOCOM [U.S. Special Operations Command], USTRANSCOM [U.S. Transportation Command], and NSA/USCYBERCOM [National Security Administration/U.S. Cyber Command] are critical to campaigning in Africa because we rely so much on these commands for support. These commands also enable our activities and provide us with the ability to respond to crises. We could not have evacuated the U.S. Embassy in Sudan earlier this year as rapidly and safely as we did without the capabilities that these commands brought to bear.

I'm glad you mentioned USSPACECOM. With the DOD pivot to space-based capabilities as the next modernization milestone, we're working with them to integrate space in support of strategic goals. USSPACECOM's embedded Joint Integrated Space Team and the soon-to-be established Space Force component are a critical resource for security cooperation and crisis response. One of the most important lessons we learned during the evacuation of the U.S. Embassy in Sudan was how much space-based solutions can enhance our C2 [command and control].

*JFQ: Are our security cooperation efforts in Africa, such as the State Partnership Program that leverages the U.S. National Guard—particularly in the Sahel region—winning friends and helping build effective states?*

**General Langley:** The State Partnership Program [SPP] is one of the most successful and popular programs in Africa, with 16 nations participating. African nations build enduring and deep relationships with their National Guard partners, who bring unique perspectives and capabilities to various security cooperation efforts and shared security challenges. This year marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the SPP relationship between Morocco and Utah as well as South Africa and New York, the oldest SPP partnerships in the command. The effect of the program is clear at all our exercises, military-to-military engagements, and conferences.

*JFQ: How does USAFRICOM currently assess the threat of terrorism in Africa as a national security risk?*

**General Langley:** Africa-based terrorism is growing; the continent is increasingly seen as the center of gravity for global terrorism. We are seeing the so-called Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliates increase attacks, expand their operating areas, and be featured in global propaganda. These groups threaten U.S. personnel and interests across Africa, hinder our diplomatic missions, and undermine partner-led, U.S.-enabled operations.

Somalia-based al-Shabaab is al-Qaeda's largest and wealthiest global affiliate. We've seen high-profile al-Shabaab attacks in the past, including against the Dusit D2 Hotel in Nairobi in 2019 and against U.S. and Kenyan forces at Manda Bay Airfield in 2020. Al-Shabaab maintains the intent and capability to conduct high-profile operations outside of Somalia and wants to replicate their past successes if we give them the opening to do so.

While the so-called Islamic State poses less of a direct threat to the homeland, they are concerning because of their rapid expansion across the continent due to their ability to co-opt and leverage existing groups. I'm specifically concerned about their expansion in West Africa, as they are poised to take advantage of the ungoverned space created by the current crisis in Niger.



U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to Task Force–Tomahawk conduct airfield clearance during base defense exercise at Cooperative Security Location Manda Bay, Kenya, August 4, 2023 (U.S. Air Force/Dhruv Gopinath)

***JFQ:** How is Great Power competition playing out on the African continent with specific concerns, such as confronting Russia’s Wagner Group or expanding China’s economic influence?*

**General Langley:** We see strategic competitors take advantage of poorly governed spaces and the conflict created by VEOs to expand their access and influence. Strategic competitors actively exploit African countries’ resources and populations, and I stress during engagements with African leaders that their proposals are never a “good deal” due to the strings attached.

The PRC [People’s Republic of China] already has one naval base on the continent, and we think they are looking to expand basing into other parts of Africa. The PRC are predatory lenders, and we have seen them set investment traps through things like Safe City Smart City, the Belt and Road Initiative, or foreign military sales. Their illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing in the Gulf of Guinea and other locations has a huge economic impact on African populations,

especially those that rely on fish as their primary source of nutrition.

Russia and the Wagner PMC [private military company] have been increasing ties with African nations in recent years, and we have seen several African nations, most recently Mali, turn away from the West and to Wagner to solve their security cooperation needs. We’re still assessing what the death of [Yevgeny] Prigozhin means for future Wagner activities on the continent, but I’m convinced that the Russians have invested in Africa and that they mean to remain there and expand their foothold.

***JFQ:** What is your assessment of the evolving global integration process, and, if you see the need for enhancements, what would you suggest doing?*

**General Langley:** The joint force is continuously improving and streamlining global integration, but unity of actions is a difficult problem to solve because of the inherent limitations of our current joint force structure.

Our competitors are global actors that require a globally integrated response. Unified Campaign Plan boundaries and lack of Joint Staff authority to fully integrate the joint force against global problem sets result in largely regional solutions that don’t achieve the type of unity of action required for strategic competition.

Each Joint Staff directorate, OSD [Office of the Secretary of Defense], CSFG/RSI [China Strategic Focus Group/Russia Strategic Initiative], and CCMD CA [combatant command coordinating authority] leads some aspect of global integration. The coordination between the integrators is a point that could be improved. At various points in the past, combatant commands participated in multiple overlapping and seemingly uncoordinated integration efforts across the various product lines.

Most of the redundancy has worked its way out of the system, but global integration could benefit from a single overarching OSD or Joint Staff–led global integration process that includes plans, operations, and assessments. **JFQ**