

# The Strategic Competition for Partnership

## Inside Views from the Backbench: An Aide's Observations of Senior Leader Engagements

Capt. Sarah Melville, U.S. Army

**I**n October 2018, in Gaborone, Botswana, over thirty key African leaders and defense attachés gathered in a small room for an icebreaker. The term “icebreaker” did not translate to most in the room and seemed nothing more than Western colloquialism. Together, huddled by country, this was the start of a U.S. Army Africa (USARAF) Regional Leader’s Seminar.<sup>1</sup> The USARAF deputy commanding general (DCG) opened the gathering with a warm welcome and introduction for the discussions to come. Establishing a personal connection with his African counterparts would be critical if the dialogue the next day was to be fruitful. Over the course of the evening, the metaphorical ice melted.

The Regional Leader’s Seminar aimed to engage with key military leaders and discuss ways they and their respective militaries can come together to increase security, stability, and the overall peace within a region and the continent. To discuss such wide-ranging

topics is no simple task, with leaders carrying the historical memory of generations of tribal, ethnic, or colonial conflict often against others around the table. Furthermore, with the U.S. Army as the cohost and facilitator, a diplomatic and nuanced tone is necessary to mitigate perceptions of neocolonialism.

The following article identifies key principles learned through analyzing over seventy engagements between a DCG and leaders such as chiefs of defense, land component commanders, UN commanders, and ambassadors, as well as DCG engagements as a co-exercise director for major military exercises involving well over half the countries in Africa. From this analysis, many patterns emerge for how to successfully build, maintain, and expand strategic relationships into sustainable partnerships. From the vantage point of an aide-de-camp, the following insights delve into the inner workings of a senior leader’s engagement preparation, execution, and follow-up.



Members of the Ethiopian National Defense Force and the U.S. Army salute 16 July 2019 during their countries' national anthems at the opening ceremony for the field training exercise portion of Justified Accord 2019 at the Hurso Training Center near Dire Dawa, Ethiopia. Justified Accord is an annual combined, joint exercise designed to strengthen partnerships, increase interoperability, and enhance the capability and capacity of international participants to promote regional security and support peacekeeping operations for the African Union Mission in Somalia. (Photo by Sgt. Aubry Buzek, U.S. Army)

The importance of engaging our partners successfully is critical within strategic competition. As Chief of Staff of the Army General James McConville says,

We never want to fight alone. We will always strive to fight in combined formations with our allies and partners who share our values and interests. Our allies and partners provide us a unique and powerful advantage over our adversaries.<sup>2</sup>

To strengthen this advantage and build strategic partnerships, transparency and an outward sense of humility, particularly in addressing complex problems, is key. Each engagement serves as more than a meeting; it is an opportunity to foster a relationship and appreciate and encourage the diversity of experiences each partner provides. It is also an opportunity

to exemplify the professionalism and principles that characterize the U.S. military. Persistency in building partners across all sectors of government and the ability to capture and amplify the effects of a senior leader's engagements throughout an organization further increase the ability to solidify our comparative advantage in strategic partnerships. Relationship building at a strategic level not only affects alliances between nations but also filters down to units on the ground, which can further enhance the resourcefulness, creativity, and adaptability of our forces.

## Partnerships Grown Out of Humility

An important leadership trait in effective engagement is humility. Humility is a state of mind; it helps offset historical antagonisms and fosters a receptive





Maj. Gen. Roger Cloutier (right), U.S. Army Africa commanding general, meets with Senegal Brig. Gen. Cheikh Wade, chief of army staff, for a bilateral engagement during African Land Forces Summit (ALFS) at Gaborone International Convention Center, Gaborone, Botswana, 27 June 2019. ALFS is a four-day seminar that brings together land forces chiefs from across Africa to discuss topics of common interest. (Photo by Spc. Angelica Gardner, U.S. Army)

environment to build new partnerships from a mutually beneficial blank slate.

The DCG treated everyone he met, from a Dutch corporal to the highest-ranking officer in Rwanda, with respect and showed he valued their time and willingness to meet with him. Instead of discussing the accolades of the U.S. Army and the benefits of our partnered training, he instead listened to the successes and challenges faced by his partners and asked how the U.S. Army could help make *their own initiatives* more effective. By turning the conversation around to show an interest in building a partner's capacity, he set the tone to establish a mutually beneficial relationship. He frequently spent more time listening than talking and was genuine in his desire for partnership and friendship.

The DCG approached his engagements with a clear mission—he was not looking to sell a product or

advertise the U.S. Army. Rather, he wanted to build relationships that contributed to lasting partnerships. He was not dismissive or armed with a hidden agenda; both can quickly stifle a relationship before it even begins.

Conducting a meaningful senior leader engagement with tangible outcomes requires finesse and interpersonal skills, the ability to judge a situation quickly, and a respect for other cultures. To show this respect, one must be conscious of how he or she communicates within his or her own military and recognize that the same methods may not always be conducive with international partners. Particularly in first impressions, words can set the precedent. For example, the DCG once met with an African senior leader and began discussing the role of USARAF within its combatant command, U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM), something he commonly did to better articulate how

the organization fits within the U.S. military. However, the partner leader immediately cut him off and asked whom he commanded in Africa. The question startled the DCG. Concerned about harming the relationship, he quickly translated the U.S. military term further, explaining it as an organizational construct and not a literal command of Africa.

Organizational phrases and slogans do not always mean the same things to our partners as they do to us. Another example is “African solutions for African problems,” which to U.S. Army leaders holds a positive connotation and stresses the goal of building our partners’ capacities so they may be better able to counter regional and continent-wide challenges independently. However, in a discussion with around two dozen senior African leaders following a multinational exercise, the partner cohort bluntly stated, many problems affecting Africa are not “African” problems but global ones.

While a leader may not understand all the intricacies of their partner’s history and culture, one leveling characteristic to help alleviate unintentional tension from such situations is genuine humility.

## Appreciating Diversity of Experience

A senior leader represents his or her military and country; his or her engagements are not merely individual but help to build allies amongst nations. Equally important to understanding a senior leader’s individual role and responsibility is recognizing his or her own biases and perceptions that may shape how he or she engages. A leader who appreciates the diversity of experiences a partner offers can increase the collaboration and reciprocated knowledge between their forces instead of underappreciating the value the partnership can mean for both sides.

Many misconceptions exist when labeling a country “third world” or “developing”; these labels do not equate to the abilities or intellectual sophistication of a country’s people. In our travels, it was common to come across a partnered service member who spoke six or more distinct languages, including English. Our exercises were run in English; leaders from throughout Africa would regularly converse and brief in a language that was not their first or even third language learned. Not only did many of our partners have impressive language capabilities, but they also had military training and combat

experience vastly different and often more challenging than that of most American service members.

For example, an officer who grew up as a refugee in Uganda started his military experience in the Ugandan National Resistance Army. When he left Uganda, he went from one conflict to another and began fighting against the genocidaires in Rwanda. Determined to save his fellow countrymen, he walked across the country with little food and water to help end the genocide. This background shaped his passion for peacekeeping operations. He subsequently fought in Darfur out of a sense of duty to prevent what happened in Rwanda from happening in another country. He never received any branch-specific training but instead grew up training as a rebel. He is now a general officer with a sincere desire to help professionalize his force. He champions the development of an NCO corps and incorporating more women in the military, particularly in peacekeeping operations. His expertise in survival training and peacekeeping operations greatly varies from that of our own military members, yet many of his goals for professionalization are the same. Just as the U.S. military values diversity as a strength within its ranks, recognizing the diversity of experiences with our allies can lead to more mutually beneficial partnerships. The following are a couple of examples of partnerships grown out of diversity.

Many African countries provide the environment for our partners to excel and teach U.S. forces how to become more resilient, creative, and tenacious. U.S. soldiers who conducted field training during USARAF exercises with their partners in Ethiopia and Rwanda learned just as much from their partners if not more than what our partners learned from them. From survival techniques to infantry tactics, our partners excelled and demonstrated to our soldiers that a lack of resources does not equate to poor

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tactical skills. While soldiering requires basic resources, it was interesting to observe our heavily laden U.S. forces trying to keep pace with their counterparts racing through the hills of the training area and to see our reliance on radios compared to the dependence on verbal communications and hand signals by our partners.

In one exercise, our partners taught U.S. engineers how to build barriers using local materials instead of preconstructed containers, which was a more cost-effective and expedient method utilizing minimal resources. Similarly, one theme we heard in Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Senegal during U.S. Army medical readiness exercises was how adaptive our partners are. While U.S. medical professionals can sometimes rely too much on technology, our partners taught our soldiers how to adjust to a less resourceful environment—to do more with less. Our medical professionals learned to operate without relying on machinery and admired the creativity of our partners to cure patients without tools our soldiers previously thought essential. Such adaptive training left soldiers better prepared for combat deployments where technology inevitably fails.

Training on the African continent is unique; it offers a plethora of opportunities for training at every level, in austere and challenging environments, often with language barriers and diverse cultures. When training in African countries, American units typically deploy halfway across the world into areas that often lack roads and basic infrastructure that are taken for granted stateside. From the very beginning, a unit enters an environment full of more questions than answers, forcing leaders to adapt quickly and develop solutions independently. The Army strives to develop adaptive leaders who

possess cultural and geopolitical awareness to properly prepare subordinates for the places they will work, the people with whom they will operate, and the adversaries or enemies they will face ... Cultural understanding is crucial to the success of operations.<sup>3</sup>

Opportunities to train with our African partners can help build the type of leader the Army requires.

From observing major exercises on the continent involving headquarters staff, medical, engineering, military police, and infantry training, it is clear an exercise in the United States cannot replicate the natural challenges that a unit must face in many countries in Africa. Exercises on the continent expose U.S. soldiers

to partners of different militaries and varying experience levels, cultural and language barriers, and multiagency and joint settings. This type of environment not only encourages creative and effective leadership but can also serve as a recruitment and retention tool. Throughout our missions, several service members across all branches and components of the military told us they would rather train in Africa experiencing real-world difficulties and challenges than in a simulated exercise at home.

During Justified Accord 19, elements from across the U.S. military deployed to Ethiopia to conduct a command post exercise, field training exercise, and medical readiness exercise. The infantry and engineer field training exercises were in a rural area nearly three hundred miles from the capital. When contracting support was insufficient in the remote outpost, Army engineer junior officers and NCOs took it upon themselves to design and execute expeditionary basic life support for their units in the training area. They lived an engineer's dream of building structures from the ground up to be utilized temporarily by their sister American units and by their partner forces permanently after the exercise. This contrasts with most exercises in the United States in which such structures must be demolished before the unit returns to home station. While the engineers benefited from creatively building and constructing improvised structures with few resources, their infantry peers thrived in the austere environment and gained a greater appreciation for their Ethiopian counterparts. While such environments were akin to combat deployment conditions for the American soldiers, they were normal training conditions for Ethiopian soldiers. Both field training exercises forced American soldiers to develop outside their comfort zones and build upon their innovative leadership.

Through a shared openness to learning from one another, our militaries can become stronger through each other's diverse backgrounds. Understanding how a partnership is mutually beneficial is key for senior leaders to appreciate that the effects of the bonds between militaries goes well beyond its high-ranking leaders.

## **The Power of Diplomacy and Professionalism**

In an era of strategic competition, one factor that sets the U.S. military apart from its peers is its



professionalism. Foreign partners often told us of their desire to emulate the American military. It was common to work and engage with high-ranking officers who previously attended U.S. military schools and utilized our doctrine and principles just as much as, if not more than, their own. In any engagement, the U.S. military uniform represents far more than the

soldiers and Army civilians whose collective expertise is the ethical design, generation, support, and application of landpower; serving under civilian authority; and entrusted to defend the Constitution and the rights and interests of the American people.<sup>5</sup>

The Army profession is empowered by and exists as a product of American democracy. To many of our

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individual does; as such, all who wear it must serve as diplomats and professionals.

To be an Army professional means more than physical fitness and a crisp uniform. It means embodying “Trust, Honorable Service, Military Expertise, Stewardship, and Esprit de Corps.”<sup>4</sup> In an engagement, a senior leader must uphold these values and remember that everything they do is viewed as an example of U.S. Army professionalism. The standards are justifiably high, yet attainable. For example, the DCG began almost every morning with a run despite jet lag, late nights, and early morning meetings. These runs were also informal opportunities for a partner leader to join, and on occasion, even local children could not resist. The DCG was an expert on U.S. Army missions in Africa. Often with little time to prepare he could quickly study a read-ahead book or receive a five-minute brief before giving on the spot speeches or offering advice and guidance during the execution of an exercise. He did not shy away from but embraced the media and was always prepared to field questions. Every event was an opportunity to demonstrate U.S. military professionalism and the value of USARAF to our partners.

With Army professionalism as our comparative advantage, it was critical that the DCG represent this in every setting. The idea of professionalism goes beyond the individual and holds a deeper meaning with many of our partners’ desires for their own often nascent armies. To many of our partners, the U.S. Army is the standard bearer of military professionalism. The U.S. Army profession is defined as a trusted vocation of

partners, the uniform is synonymous with American ideals and freedoms.

The U.S. Army is a professional force under civilian control and consists of professionals who uphold the institution’s values of character, competence, and commitment.<sup>6</sup> Such a military represents what Ambassador Alexander Laskaris, former USAFRICOM deputy to the commander for civil-military engagement, describes as an army that people *run to* versus one that they *run from*.<sup>7</sup> Similar to the history of the U.S. military, many militaries in Africa are newly established and often trace their roots through a rebellion. Therefore, it is unsurprising that key leaders throughout Africa want to emulate the U.S. Army’s model—to be an army that protects and upholds the trust and respect of its citizens. After all, the term “professionalism” implies a duty to society without which the society could not thrive; in the case of the Army, it is a duty to defend.<sup>8</sup>

Another aspect that sets U.S. Army professionalism apart is the role of NCOs. NCOs are the backbone of the U.S. Army, and this aspect does not go unnoticed in Africa. As one African army chief of staff said during a formal meeting with the DCG, “If you have a strong NCO Corps you have a strong army.” During our travels throughout Africa, we observed that militaries varied greatly in their NCO corps and in how NCOs are utilized. Few countries in the world have a strong NCO corps, and often, officers do not empower their NCOs. The DCG made it a point to constantly discuss the role of NCOs and emphasize their value during



Sgt. Maj. Richard Thresher (*right*), senior enlisted leader of U.S. Africa Command, addresses Kenyan troops 18 December 2020 in Kenya. Warrant Officer Class One Elijah Koranga, Kenya Defense Forces sergeant major, invited Thresher to observe the culminating event of the newly developed Kenyan Command Course for noncommissioned officers (NCO)—a course implemented by Koranga following an African Enlisted Development Strategy key leader engagement in the United States in March 2020, when he visited NCO academies from each branch of the U.S. Armed Forces. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Africa Command)

his engagements. One of USAFRICOM's initiatives is to help our partners build their own NCO corps. The DCG's engagements were not one-sided as our partners recognized the worth and importance of NCOs but often lacked the systems to develop an effective corps, which was where our military could aid them. To help build more professional and effective partner militaries in Africa, the role of NCOs is essential, and it is the U.S. Army's example that represents yet another comparative advantage in the eyes of our partners.

## **Military Engagement as a Tool for Good Governance**

The military, political, social, and economic spheres of a country are necessarily intertwined. What may start as a purely military engagement amongst senior leaders can quickly and beneficially move across all sectors.

During exercise Shared Accord 19, nearly two dozen countries from across Africa came together to simulate a multinational headquarters in support of the UN mission to the Central African Republic. At the end of the exercise, leaders from every country were invited to attend a senior leader seminar and share their views on the greatest challenges faced by countries in Africa. Overwhelmingly, leaders from every region in Africa stated that corruption and poor governance are the roots of instability and conflict in most countries on the continent—not violent extremist organizations and not the conflicts themselves.

Our partner leaders also recognize that the upcoming population boom makes their desire for good governance imminent. By 2050, it is estimated that one in four people in the world will live in Africa, with 60 percent of that population under the age of



twenty-five.<sup>9</sup> It is no wonder that our partners regularly speak about economic development and governance as their countries' top priorities to decrease instability and conflict. In many countries we visited, the military is the strongest institution and integral to both economic development and political reform. Therefore, strong military relationships with our partners can also contribute to achieving economic and political initiatives.

The Rwanda Defence Force actively conducts citizen outreach programs to reduce poverty, increase the well-being of locals, and spur economic development. A country that a little over twenty-five years ago faced a genocide today focuses on fostering internal stability and on contributing to regional security. Rwanda is the fourth largest troop contributing country to UN peacekeeping operations in Africa.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the Senegalese Armed Forces participate in the "Army Nation" concept in which the military oversees developmental construction projects such as schools, roads, and hospitals, which foster civil-military relations and economic empowerment. As examples in Rwanda and Senegal demonstrate, the military is often crucial to the overall picture within a whole-of-government approach to stability and peace in African countries. Security and development go hand in hand.

## The Importance of Persistent Engagement as Demonstrated by the State Partnership Program

Perhaps the best model for partnership building across military, political, and economic sectors in Africa is the National Guard's State Partnership Program (SPP). The SPP pairs a National Guard and its state with a country; there are eighty-five partnerships, sixteen with African countries.<sup>11</sup> The SPP goes beyond the military and "leverages whole-of-society relationships and capabilities to facilitate broader interagency and corollary engagements spanning military, government, economic and social spheres."<sup>12</sup> The National Guard is particularly well suited for this mission as it brings in the civilian expertise of its members and works with state governments. For example, the University of Vermont and the Vermont National Guard partnered with the Senegalese during a 2019 medical training exercise. The University of Vermont Medical Center donated two portable x-ray machines and the National Guard sent medical professionals to

provide services and share best practices with their partners.<sup>13</sup> In North Carolina, the relationship with Botswana includes partnerships in the agriculture and national emergency response sectors in addition to the military-to-military relationship.

Utilizing minimal resourcing, the SPP's strength comes in persistent engagement over a prolonged period. Throughout our travels, we heard stories of leaders in the United States and in African countries who grew up together, attending the same military training, and even sending their children to spend summers in each other's countries. All armies in Africa are significantly smaller than the U.S. Army, and while turnaround is common in the U.S. active-duty Army, it is not in the National Guard, which allows for engagement that is more consistent. Persistent engagement at a general officer level is also important.

As is the case in all hierarchical organizations, rank matters in the military. During engagements with our partners in Africa, the DCG was viewed as a decision-maker, which helped open many doors that enabled USARAF missions. The fact that the DCG took the time to meet with our partners demonstrated to them how important USARAF viewed their relationship. Our partners equally matched the DCG's rank or higher, showing their respect in turn. While persistent engagement at all levels is critical to a lasting partnership as demonstrated through the SPP, persistent engagement at the general officer level in Africa is key to strategic success.

## Empowering Aides

Another tool a senior leader often has at his or her disposal during senior leader engagements is an aide-de-camp. An empowered aide can serve as a second set of eyes and ears. While it may be seen as unprofessional or rude in many circumstances for a senior leader to jot down notes during his or her conversations, an aide bears the responsibility of noting any commitments made, requests for information, and summarizing topics covered during the conversation. These notes can later be used to inform other engagements, develop task lists for staff, and to write reports to inform a leader's organization. The DCG made it a pattern that when he engaged, his aide sat next to him and was more than welcome to join the conversation, no matter the rank of who he was meeting with. In this way, his aide was not seen as merely a note taker, which could cause suspicion, but instead



as an active participant. With an aide as a junior officer, often partner leaders enjoyed taking the time to explain concepts to his aide just as they would to their own junior leaders. When considering aides, senior leaders should consider selecting someone apt at note-taking and with whom they are comfortable conversing and working a room. With an empowered aide, engagements can transcend the room in which they take place, with notable information disseminated throughout a staff to increase planning efficiency and expertise for future operations and engagements.

## Summary

The positive or negative impact of senior leader engagements goes beyond the minimal resources required to execute them. For the cost of transportation and an

hour or two of time, partnerships can form that open doors for mutually beneficial opportunities, promote strategic objectives, and ultimately build networks to promote peace and stability globally. The basic principles of humility, promoting diversity of experiences, and professionalism can serve to inform key leaders in engagements around the world. Furthermore, an aide can be an additional asset within a senior leader's engagements. In an ever-connected and competitive world, the value of mutually beneficial relationships continues to grow. Understanding how to effectively engage is essential to maintaining a comparative advantage in the strategic competition over partnerships. ■

*The views expressed here are the authors and do not represent those of the U.S. Army or the Department of Defense.*

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## Notes

1. U.S. Army Africa consolidated with U.S. Army Europe in 2020, increasing the leverage the U.S. Army can use to support efforts in the U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) area of responsibility. The U.S. Army Southern European Task Force, Africa directly supports USAFRICOM as a joint-task-force-capable headquarters in addition to maintaining oversight and resourcing of hundreds of Army-supported theater security cooperation events in Africa each year.

2. "Change of Responsibility Ceremony," Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, 9 August 2019, accessed 16 September 2021, <https://www.dvidshub.net/video/702010/change-responsibility-ceremony>.

3. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, July 2019), 4-4–4-5, accessed 15 September 2021, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/ARN20039-ADP\\_6-22-001-WEB-0.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN20039-ADP_6-22-001-WEB-0.pdf).

4. Ibid., 1-2.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 1-8.

7. Chris Karns, "Africa: A Continent Where Partnership is in Demand," *Military Times* (website), 23 March 2017, accessed 15 September 2021, <https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2019/03/23/africa-a-continent-where-partnership-is-in-demand/>.

8. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-1, 1-7–1-9.

9. "Africa's Population Will Double by 2050," *The Economist* (website), 28 March 2020, accessed 15 September 2021, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/03/26/africas-population-will-double-by-2050>; "Why Young, Urban or Rich Africans are Less Likely to Vote," *The Economist* (website), 22 February 2020, accessed 15 September 2021, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/02/20/why-young-urban-or-rich-africans-are-less-likely-to-vote>.

10. "Troop and Police Contributors," United Nations Peacekeeping, accessed 27 March 2022, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

11. "National Guard State Partnership Program," National Guard, accessed 4 January 2022, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/Portals/31/Documents/J-5/InternationalAffairs/StatePartnership-Program/NG%20SPP%20Map%20update%2001%20OCT%2021.pdf?ver=LT6tjAqgph2TE9nadGMA5w%3d%3d>.

12. "State Partnership Program," National Guard, accessed 28 December 2019, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/Leadership/Joint-Staff/J-5/International-Affairs-Division/State-Partnership-Program/>.

13. Jason Alvarez, "Portable X-Ray Machines," Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, 9 April 2019, accessed 15 September 2021, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/5251629/portable-x-ray-machines>.

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