

**PANEL DISCUSSION BY VICE ADMIRAL AZ GAMBO (RTD) CFR
ON CONDUCTING JOINT MARITIME OPERATIONS AT THE
TRANSATLANTIC MARITIME SECURITY SYMPOSIUM BY AFRICA
CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES IN LAGOS NIGERIA
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INTRODUCTION

1. Good morning, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, fellow panelists from the United State (U.S.) Department of State and the U.S. Naval Forces Africa/ Sixth Fleet and our esteemed moderators. It is a profound honour to stand before you today on behalf of the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies. I want to express my sincere gratitude to William Yates and the ACSS team for the invitation to share my reflections during this Transatlantic Maritime Security Symposium. As we gather in Lagos, we must recognize that the maritime domain is no longer a secondary theatre of operations, it is the economic lifeline of our nations. Today, we are here to discuss **"Conducting Joint Maritime Operations."** Nigeria has always conducted Joint Maritime Operations with other services and Combined Maritime Operations, as in the case of ECOMOG in the nineties. I would like to start with a quotation that is very dear to me and I quote **"Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success."** unquote.

2. As the former Chief of the Naval Staff of the Nigerian Navy, I can attest that while the strategies are written in peacetime, their success is entirely dependent on the groundwork we lay long before a crisis occurs. For the next 15 minutes, I will offer a reflection on the principles that enable successful multinational maritime operations, drawing directly from Nigeria's experiences, and addressing the three guiding questions provided to me by the organizers.

**DOCTRINAL PRINCIPLES, COMMAND RELATIONS AND THE
COMBINED MARITIME TASK FORCE**

3. The first question the organizers asked, was throughout your tenure leading the Nigerian Navy, what doctrinal principles proved most

important for establishing clear command relationships, authorities and decision-making processes during joint, interagency and multinational maritime operations, and how can these help partners operate effectively within a Combined Maritime Task Force construct?

4. In my experience, the foundation of any successful joint operation whether it is a Combined Maritime Task Force or an interagency operation rest on three doctrinal pillars: **Unity of Effort, Decentralized Execution and Absolute Clarity of Authority**. Nigeria's Total Spectrum Maritime Strategy exemplifies how the doctrinal principles of unity of effort, decentralized execution and clear command authority can be operationalised into a comprehensive national framework one that not only addresses the full spectrum of maritime threats but also provides a template for the kind of multinational integration we are discussing today. When you are operating in a Combined Maritime Task Force, you are bringing together navies, coast guards and air forces from different nations, all with distinct cultures and national mandates. The doctrinal principle of Unity of Effort is what binds us. It is not enough to have a common enemy; you must have a common operational picture.

5. It was this same commitment to maritime security that, during my tenure, led to Nigeria's historic delisting from the International Maritime Bureau's piracy-prone list in March 2022, a feat not achieved in 27 years and which serves as concrete proof that combined naval operations can deliver tangible globally recognised results. To achieve this, we heavily emphasized the doctrine of **Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)** as the bedrock of command. You cannot exercise command over what you cannot see. By integrating our maritime surveillance assets from the Nigerian Navy's Falcon Eye system to regional intelligence fusion centres, we established the necessary situational awareness that allows commanders to make informed decisions.

6. Furthermore, for a Combined Maritime Task Force to function, **Decentralized Execution** must be paired with clear **Rules of Engagement (ROE)** and command intent. A commander on a ship in the Gulf of Guinea cannot wait for a headquarters thousands of miles away to make tactical decisions. The doctrinal principle here is "**Mission**

Command." We must ensure that our subordinate commanders understand the strategic intent so clearly that they can act autonomously within the bounds of their national and international legal authorities. Finally, clear command relationships mean knowing who has tactical control (TACON) and who has operational control (OPCON) at any given moment. In a multinational construct, this requires robust pre-agreements and doctrine. It is about establishing mutual trust so that a U.S. commander and a Nigerian commander can seamlessly hand over tactical control of a vessel without hesitation because they share the same doctrinal playbook.

MITIGATING FRICTION AND MAINTAINING UNITY OF EFFORT

7. This leads directly to the second question: Combined maritime operations often face friction arising from differing national priorities, legal authorities, command structures, and information-sharing practices. Based on your experience, what leadership approaches and organizational mechanisms are most effective in mitigating these challenges and maintaining unity of effort among diverse partners?

8. I want to be candid with you: friction is inevitable. It is a natural by-product of bringing together diverse sovereign nations. The friction arises because a U.S. Sixth Fleet vessel, a European frigate and a Nigerian Navy vessel may have different legal constraints regarding the apprehension of pirates or the handling of detainees. National priorities also differ; one nation might prioritize counter-piracy, while another prioritizes illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

9. How do we mitigate this? **Leadership, Trust and Standardized Mechanisms.** First, leadership approaches: As commanders, we must move beyond a transactional relationship and build a relational one. This means investing in personal relationships before the crisis. When I meet with my counterparts from the U.S., Europe and neighbouring African nations at conferences like this, we are not just discussing tactics; we are building the trust necessary to overcome legal and procedural friction when we are at sea. A leader must foster a culture of mutual respect, acknowledging the constraints of partners while focusing on the shared objective. During my tenure, I hosted a couple of conferences

and ensured I attended all conferences I was invited in order to foster and develop relations required to build trust and minimise bureaucratic processes that cause delays. In some instances of hot pursuit, the Navy was able to secure clearance to continue the pursuit before the bureaucratic processes were completed. A Combined Maritime Task Force dramatically reduces bureaucratic friction, enabling significantly extended operational range and coverage, while also providing the legal and political framework for forces to operate seamlessly across the territorial waters of participating nations.

10. A significant milestone in this journey has been the pursuit of an African Union-led Combined Maritime Task Force for the Gulf of Guinea. This initiative was not born overnight. It was a culmination of persistent advocacy, beginning with the Port Harcourt Declaration in 2022, which called for the establishment of such a force. It can be recalled that on 22 May 2023, during the Presidential Fleet Review, Nigeria hosted a pivotal meeting of Heads of Navies and Coast Guards from across the region in Lagos in which eleven nations sat and signed for flag off of Combined Maritime Task Force for the Gulf of Guinea. The key agenda item was the establishment of this Task Force, and it was here that a foundational agreement was reached among the naval chiefs to move forward with its operationalization. This effort was subsequently endorsed by the African Union Peace and Security Council. I am proud that Nigeria pledged to host the headquarters in Lagos and the force is now set to become a reality, with its formal flag-off during the Nigerian Navy's 70th anniversary. This Task Force represents the ultimate expression of the principles I have discussed today: unity of effort, shared responsibility and a collective commitment to securing our shared maritime domain. Although it is yet to be fully operationalised, its prospects are looking promising.

11. Second, the synchronisation of doctrine for enhanced interoperability is another measure to reduce friction. Harmonising military doctrines, communication protocols, rules of engagement and SOPs across regions is critical to reducing friction during joint and combined operations and enhancement of interoperability. Training institutions with dedicated slots for international officers such as Armed Forces Command and Staff College, Naval War College and National

Defence College are assisting in this regard through formalised joint training, cross-postings and combined exercises designed to build trust and meet clear interoperability standards in logistics, communications and command and control. This would enable forces from different regions to operate more effectively together, reduce delays and operational friction.

12. Third, organizational mechanisms. The most effective mechanism for mitigating friction is the **Liaison Officer Exchange**. During operations, we embed liaison officers from partner nations directly into our Maritime Operations Centres (MOCs). This is not just a symbolic gesture. These officers provide real-time context on their nation's legal authorities and national priorities, preventing misunderstandings before they escalate.

13. Additionally, we rely on **Standardized Information-Sharing Protocols**. Friction often arises simply because we are not speaking the same technical language. By adopting standardized reporting formats such as those promoted by the Yaoundé Code of Conduct, we ensure that information flows seamlessly. We must also utilize **SHADE (Shared Awareness and Deconfliction)** mechanisms. SHADE meetings provide a crucial forum where partners can deconflict their operations, share intelligence, and align their patrols to avoid duplication of effort. Mitigating friction is not about eliminating our differences, it is about creating robust mechanisms that allow us to operate effectively despite those differences.

INTEGRATION, INTEROPERABILITY AND LESSONS FROM NIGERIA

14. This brings me to the third and final question: As maritime forces seek to integrate national assets and operational platforms into regional security architectures, what factors should commanders consider to ensure interoperability, mission alignment, and sustained operational effectiveness, and what lessons from Nigeria's experience would you offer to leaders planning future multinational maritime initiatives?

15. To integrate national assets into a regional security architecture effectively, commanders must consider three critical factors: **Technological Interoperability, Human Interoperability and Sustainable Logistics**. Let us start with technology. It is easy to focus on acquiring high-end platforms, but interoperability means ensuring your communication systems, data links and radar systems can actually talk to your partners. If my ship cannot share its radar picture with a U.S. vessel, we are not interoperable. Nigeria has learned that investing in C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) systems that adhere to international standards is non-negotiable for regional integration.

16. However, technology is useless without **Human Interoperability**. You can have the best data links in the world, but if your officers do not understand how their counterparts think and operate, the system will fail. This is why Nigeria has prioritized multinational exercises, such as the annual **OBANGAME EXPRESS**. These exercises are not just about firing weapons; they are about testing our procedures, our communication and our ability to work together under stress.

17. The third factor is **Sustainable Logistics and Mission Alignment**. Regional architectures often fail because they are not sustainable. You cannot have a sustained operational presence if you cannot fuel, feed and maintain your vessels. Commanders must align their missions with realistic logistical capabilities.

18. What lessons can Nigeria offer?

My proposition is firstly that:

a. **Ownership is key.** Regional security could be led and owned by the regional nations. The Yaoundé Architecture works because African nations took the lead, with international partners like the U.S. and the EU providing critical enabling support.

b. **Incremental Progress.** Building a regional architecture is a marathon, not a sprint. It requires persistent engagement, continuous training and a willingness to learn from failures. It will

take some time for us to get to where we want to be and to achieve our set objectives.

c. **Leverage Existing Frameworks.** Do not reinvent the wheel. Nigeria works closely with ECOWAS and the Gulf of Guinea Commission. Integrating national assets means plugging them into these existing political and operational frameworks to ensure legitimacy and effectiveness. The AU Combined Maritime Task Force, once fully operationalised, could be well suited for this.

CONCLUSION

19. In conclusion, conducting joint maritime operations is a complex endeavour. It requires us to navigate the turbulent waters of differing national interests, legal authorities, and operational cultures. But as we have seen in the Gulf of Guinea, the rewards of successful cooperation reduced piracy, secure sea lanes and economic prosperity are well worth the effort. The principles that enable success are timeless: clear command intent, decentralized execution, mutual trust built through personal relationships and a relentless commitment to interoperability.

20. As you deliberate on the future of transatlantic maritime security, I urge you to remember that our navies are not just instruments of war; they are instruments of diplomacy and economic security. Let us continue to build these bridges of cooperation. But let us also remember that the ultimate responsibility lies with us. I would like to end with a quote that essentially sums up all I have said by Vice Admiral Wikoff, Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Africa and I quote **"Maritime security is a shared responsibility. The relationships strengthened through continued engagement help us better understand one another's operating environments and improve our collective ability to promote a safe, secure and prosperous maritime domain"** unquote. Thank you for your rapt attention. I look forward to our question and answer session.