Allez, Allez, Skies are Blue: France is building Europe's air bridge to the Indo–Pacific

31 OCTOBER 2026

Sarvagya Pandey



Photo by david hili on Unsplash

On September 8th 2026, four Rafale F4 fighters departed Istres in southern France and did not head east. They were headed north. After Greenland, Canada and Alaska, they flew on to Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and India, and finally to Qatar, Réunion and Egypt. Accompanying them were three A330 Phénix tanker-transports, two A400M Atlas airlifters and about 300 personnel (Afterburner, 2026a). PÉGASE 26, the seventh edition of the French Air and Space Force's long-range power projection mission, went on till October 15th, covering more than 40,000 kilometres (The Week, 2026).

The timing is worth considering, because in 2025 the same chapter skipped Asia and flew to the trio of Sweden, Poland and Croatia, as the French took greater responsibility for defending NATO's eastern flank since Washington was pulling back from Europe (The Aviationist, 2025). PÉGASE 26 put Asia back on the map without dropping the north.

This brief looks at whether France can project European air power into the Indo-Pacific on its own terms, outside NATO structures, and how far that reach extends. It focuses on the 26 days French forces spent in the region (Afterburner, 2026a) and leaves aside the Arctic and Middle East legs and French naval deployments. Most writing on France in the Indo-Pacific focuses on the navy, its overseas territories, and diplomacy (Pajon, 2026; RSIS, 2025), and air power usually appears only as a demonstration, a nice photograph, and little more.

The shorter answer is that France can now carry a small but self-sustaining air force across the Indo-Pacific without NATO, and the limits on that reach are access agreements and scale, not will or capability.

Terms and Data

Air power projection means one thing: moving combat aircraft to a distant theatre and keeping them flying there with your own refuelling, airlift and command. The real test is sustainment, meaning spare parts, fuel, planners and maintainers that stay with the jets until the end. PÉGASE 26 sustained. The Air Operations Planning and Command Centre at Lyon-Mont-Verdun ran the deployment remotely while it also tracked a separate mission in the Black Sea and the protection of French airspace at home (Afterburner, 2026b).

The PÉGASE Record

Each edition flew the same basic package of Rafales, tankers and airlifters. The only changes were size and destination, which let you see what France prioritised each year.

Table 1. Selected PÉGASE editions, 2022 to 2026

Sources: Kashmir Observer (2022), Afterburner (2026a), HJKC (2025), The Week (2026).

The fighter count fell from 10 in 2023 to 4 in 2026, and the support fleet from 9 aircraft to 5. Fewer fighters means less combat weight, but it can also be a choice to rehearse the logistics chain at a scale France can repeat every year without weakening its home squadrons.

Five Myths

Myth One: Four Jets are just a Photo Op

The first myth says the scale of this operation cannot matter in a region where China fields thousands of combat aircraft. It can, however, prove that a package can arrive, plug into a partner's training and leave again without help. At Hyakuri, French Phénix tankers refuelled Japanese F-2 fighters as well as Rafales (Army Recognition, 2026). At Cheongju, two Rafales trained with four Korean fighter types between September 15th and 17th, 2026. The

French Phénix also flew alongside the Korean KC-330, a cousin built on the same Airbus airframe (Zona Militar, 2026).

Myth Two: Europe in Asia Means NATO in Asia

The second myth assumes that any European military presence in Asia rides on NATO, but France has argued against this for years. After the Vilnius summit in 2023, Paris openly opposed plans for a NATO liaison office in Tokyo (ANKASAM, 2024). PÉGASE 26's Asian partners included India and Indonesia, two countries that keep their distance from military alliances. India hosted the French at Exercise Tarang Shakti in Jodhpur (New Kerala, 2026), and Indonesia received them at Halim Air Base in Jakarta (EurAsian Times, 2026). In Alaska, however, the same Rafales trained with American F-22 and F-35 fighters (EurAsian Times, 2026). Independence from NATO for France is not a distance from Washington.

Myth Three: France is a Visitor in the Region

The third myth treats France as a guest in Asia. About 1.6 million French citizens live in its Indo-Pacific territories, more than 7,000 French military personnel are stationed there, and around 90 per cent of its exclusive economic zone lies in the region (Pajon, 2026). An exclusive economic zone is the stretch of sea, up to 200 nautical miles from the coast, where a state holds rights over fishing, energy and seabed resources. In 2022, the mission moved three Rafales from metropolitan France to New Caledonia in under 72 hours, with a technical stop at the Indian Air Force station in Sulur (Kashmir Observer, 2022).

Paris has a weak spot, though. Independence movements in the overseas territories, New Caledonia above all, could shrink the economic zone and the bases that underpin French credibility (RSIS, 2025). Air power cannot settle the political debate of whether their populations want to stay.

Myth Four: It is just a Sales Tour

The fourth myth is that PÉGASE is an air show. Indonesia ordered 42 Rafales in 2022 and formally accepted its first six on May 18th 2026 (de Vries, 2026). India cleared a plan in February 2026 to buy 114 more, and its defence secretary hoped to conclude negotiations by March 2027 (Lapaas Voice, 2026).

The myth should not see sales and strategy as rivals. For an air force, a customer list is also a list of places where they can set up a base. The Indonesian Air Force parked at least three of its own Rafales beside the French jets (EurAsian Times, 2026), and at Jodhpur the deputy commander of the mission noted that both air forces had now flown the Rafale in combat and could trade those lessons (New Kerala, 2026).

There is a limit to this allegiance. In Indonesia, the same air force that welcomed the Rafales has a contract for 48 Turkish KAAN fighters, and

its chief said in October 2026 that Chinese J-10 fighters would arrive in about six months (de Vries, 2026). Jakarta buys from everyone. By selling to strategic actors, there is only assurance of access, not of allegiance.

Myth Five: Europe can now defend Asia, or that it wants to

The final myth, PÉGASE 26, serves as proof that Europe can fight in Asia. The evidence says no. The fighter count fell from 10 to 4 between 2023 and 2026, and in 2025 the entire mission was moved to northern Europe instead (The Aviationist, 2025). Access is another constraint. A reciprocal access agreement is a treaty that sets the legal status and procedures for one country's forces when they visit the other. Japan and France agreed to begin negotiations on one in May 2024 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024), but by April 2026 there was still no agreement (Delamotte, 2026).

Discussion and Limits

The findings show that France can move a compact, self-supporting air package across the Indo-Pacific and plug it into partners' training without NATO in the frame. The sales myth is somewhat true, and the part that is true actually strengthens our thesis since sales build the access network. European air reach in Asia is limited to presence and partnership, but the expectation of a fighting force is far-fetched.

France deserves most of the credit because Europe has spent years writing strategy papers debating whether it belongs in the Indo-Pacific, while Paris skipped the paperwork and sent its tankers. Anyone in the South Block who counts on France as a backstop in a crisis with China is setting up an unpleasant phone call for some future defence minister. The smarter move is to use France for what it actually offers: training, spares, a second supplier, and a partner who rarely lectures. The open sources say little about cost, readiness or how Beijing read the visit, so parts of this argument rest on judgement.

Conclusion

The takeaway is, France flew a small air force halfway round the world, kept it going for almost four weeks on its own fuel and its own planes, and trained with four Asian partners and the Americans along the way, all without asking NATO for anything. The trouble is that France only has so many fighters, Europe keeps asking for them back, and Japan still has not signed the paperwork that would let French crews turn up without a fresh round of negotiation every time. India probably has the most riding on what happens next, since a 114-jet deal would put French spares, French trainers and French habits on Indian bases for decades and make every future visit cheaper. Keep an eye on Tokyo and Paris, on the Indian contract before March 2027 and on London and Berlin, because if neither ever sends jets this far, PÉGASE stays a French story.

References

Afterburner. (2026a, August 31). PEGASE 26 – France heads for the Arctic and Indo-Pacific. https://afterburner.com.pl/pegase-26-france-heads-for-the-arctic-and-indo-pacific/

Afterburner. (2026b, September 14). PEGASE 26 opens a new route to the Indo-Pacific through the Arctic. https://afterburner.com.pl/pegase-26-opens-a-new-route-to-the-indo-pacific-through-the-arctic/

ANKASAM. (2024). Japan and France seeking military cooperation. https://www.ankasam.org/anka-analizler/japonya-ve-fransanin-askeri-isbirligi-arayislari/?lang=en

Army Recognition. (2026, September). France and Japan build a stronger air power bridge between Europe and the Indo-Pacific. https://www.armyrecognition.com/news/aerospace-news/2026/france-and-japan-build-a-stronger-air-power-bridge-between-europe-and-the-indo-pacific

Delamotte, G. (2026, April 1). France and Japan need a reciprocal access agreement to strengthen their military cooperation. Le Monde. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2026/04/01/france-and-japan-need-a-reciprocal-access-agreement-to-strengthen-their-military-cooperation_6751998_23.html

de Vries, T. (2026, October). The Indonesian Air Force in 2026: Every aircraft it flies, and the fighters it keeps ordering. Aerocorner. https://aerocorner.com/blog/indonesian-air-force/

EurAsian Times. (2026, September). Rafale jets flex muscles in China's neighborhood after Japan, South Korea: French fighters reach Indonesia. https://www.eurasiantimes.com/rafale-jets-flex-muscles-in-chinas-neighborhood-after-japan-s-korea-french-fighters-reach-indonesia/

HJKC. (2025). France's air and space chief emphasizes the militarization of space. https://www.hjkc.de/_blog/25296-raumfahrt-france-s-air-and-space-chief-emphasizes-the-militarization-of-space/

Kashmir Observer. (2022, August 12). French Air Force contingent makes stopover in India. PressReader. https://www.pressreader.com/india/kashmir-observer/20220812/281612424179896

Lapaas Voice. (2026, October 5). India to finalize $30–35B deal for 114 Rafale jets by March 2027. https://lapaasvoice.com/india-to-finalize-30-35b-deal-for-114-rafale-jets-by-march-2027/

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2024, May 2). Japan-France relations: Summit meeting. https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/we/fr/pageite_000001_00328.html

New Kerala. (2026, October 1). "Reminds me of Mirage 2000": French air general lauds India's indigenous fighter Tejas. https://www.newkerala.com/news/a/reminds-me-mirage-2000-french-air-general-lauds-855.htm

Pajon, C. (2026, September 18). The Oceania factor in France's evolving Indo-Pacific strategy. Ifri. https://www.ifri.org/en/external-articles/external-publications/oceania-factor-frances-evolving-indo-pacific-strategy

RSIS. (2025, June 24). The EU's Indo-Pacific projection relies on France – but for how long? S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/the-eus-indo-pacific-projection-relies-on-france-but-for-how-long/

The Aviationist. (2025, April 24). France Pégase 25 to Sweden. https://theaviationist.com/2025/04/24/france-pegase-25-to-sweden/

The Week. (2026, September 12). 40 days, 40,000 km: What French Rafale fighter jets aim to prove with the Arctic to India PEGASE 26? https://www.theweek.in/news/defence/2026/09/12/40-days-40000-km-what-french-rafale-fighter-jets-aim-to-prove-with-the-arctic-to-india-pegase-26.html

Zona Militar. (2026, September 17). Two French Rafales train with four South Korean fighter types during 40,000-kilometer deployment. https://www.zona-militar.com/en/2026/09/17/two-french-rafales-train-with-four-south-korean-fighter-types-during-40000-kilometer-deployment/

EPIS