



# Deployment of the French Frigate *Bretagne* in the Indo-Pacific

## Implementing French Strategy in the Region

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### ► Key Takeaways

- The deployment of the French Navy's multi-mission frigate (FREMM) *Bretagne* in the Indo-Pacific in recent months demonstrates France's capability to project power far from the mainland and solidifies its Indo-Pacific strategy.
- Operating in the Asia-Pacific region presents a considerable logistical challenge, requiring careful planning, anticipation and rigorous oversight. Having logistical and technical support points is crucial.
- For the first time, a French first-rank frigate participated in a multilateral exercise in the South China Sea (Valiant Shield 2024). The exchanges, port calls and joint exercises contribute to mutual understanding and the building of trust, which are essential for solid and lasting cooperation.
- Demonstrating action and projection capabilities is part of the French military's strategic signaling policy aimed at its counterparts in the region. However, the relative discretion of the Tanskorn mission shows that France could benefit from strengthening its strategic communication to better convey and explain the stakes of its deployments.

The multi-mission frigate (FREMM: *Frégate Européenne Multi-Mission*) *Bretagne* of the French Navy is currently deployed in the Indo-Pacific for the Tanskorn mission, which is expected to last approximately eight months. Departing from its home port of Brest in April 2024, the FREMM set course for the Indian Ocean via the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. *Bretagne* then spent several weeks navigating the South China Sea before heading to the Pacific Ocean, reaching Guam and then Hawaii, where it participated in the multilateral exercise RIMPAC. Afterward, the ship headed west and conducted a crew rotation during a stopover in Yokosuka, Japan, before beginning its return to France, scheduled for October.

This mission is unique in its nature and scope. By deploying a first-rank frigate to the Indo-Pacific, France aims to achieve two main objectives: to enhance its knowledge of the region and its operational capabilities and to deepen its cooperation with regional partners. In doing so, it is concretely implementing its strategy in this key area, though not without challenges.

The two authors successively embarked on *Bretagne* in May and June, between Jakarta and Manila and between Manila and Guam, and thus were able to observe some practical aspects of such a deployment.<sup>1</sup> This briefing is not intended to recount the entire Tanskorn mission but rather to contextualize this deployment and analyze its operational and strategic dimensions.

## Enhancing France's operational capabilities in the Indo-Pacific

France regularly projects military capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region. The surveillance frigates *Vendémiaire* and *Floréal*, based respectively in Nouméa and Papeete, regularly patrol this area. The annual Jeanne d'Arc mission, which marks the conclusion of the Naval Academy officers' training, traditionally visits the region periodically. Moreover, the deployment of the FREMM *Bretagne* follows those of the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* in 2019, the nuclear attack submarine (SNA) *Emeraude* in 2021, and the FREMM *Lorraine* in 2023.

The Air and Space Force is also enhancing its operational capabilities in the region through the PEGASE mission, which has been projecting air capabilities, including Rafale fighter jets, in the Indo-Pacific every year since 2022. These missions involve numerous stopovers and participation in bilateral and multilateral exercises. Notably, the 2024 edition of PEGASE was the most ambitious in terms of volume, complexity and number of partners involved.<sup>2</sup>

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1. The authors would like to express their deep gratitude to Commander Jérémy Bachelier, who initiated this embarkation, to Captain Gwenegan Le Bourhis, commanding officer of Crew A of the FREMM *Bretagne*, as well as to the entire crew for their warm welcome on board.

2. The United Kingdom, Germany, and Spain were crucial partners during this edition, while the French Air Force visited and cooperated in the Indo-Pacific region with Australia, India, Singapore, Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia. See the details of the PEGASE mission: [www.defense.gouv.fr](http://www.defense.gouv.fr).

These deployments aim to demonstrate France's ability to project high-end assets far from the mainland, to exercise its strategic autonomy, and to implement its Indo-Pacific strategy.

In 2019, France became the first European country to adopt a strategy for the Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup> This vast region, spanning from the eastern coasts of Africa to Oceania, is recognized as a major strategic area: it is the world's economic engine but also a zone of strong forces of destabilization, fueled by the growing challenge to international norms, particularly in maritime matters, the resurgence of geostrategic competition, and the rapid degradation of the natural environment.

The French strategy primarily aims to ensure the security of its sovereign interests in the region: its overseas territories — Réunion and Mayotte in the Indian Ocean, and New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, and Clipperton in the Pacific Ocean; its 1.8 million citizens; and its vast maritime domain of 9 million square kilometers.

As a responsible and constructive power and a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, France also seeks to reduce the risks of instability by defending a law-based international order and offering a unique approach in the context of Sino-American competition through a strategy based on partnerships and multilateralism.

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## Understanding a distant and complex environment

For the French Navy, as well as for all branches of the French armed forces, operating in the Asia-Pacific presents substantial challenges compared to theaters closer to home and more familiar, such as the Atlantic Ocean, the North Seas, the Mediterranean Sea, and up to the Gulf of Aden.

### *Taming the tyranny of distance*

Although France is indeed an Indo-Pacific nation due to its overseas territories, the sovereign forces it has in the region have limited operational capacity: approximately 8,000 military personnel, 12 ships and 40 aircraft distributed across Réunion, New Caledonia and French Polynesia. These forces are primarily dedicated to state action at sea (patrolling exclusive economic zones, maritime surveillance cooperation with neighboring countries, humanitarian and relief operations).

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3. J. Bachelier and C. Pajon, "France in the Indo-Pacific: The Need for a Pragmatic Strategic Posture", *Focus stratégique*, No. 117, Ifri, October 2023, available at: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

Rather than serving as a significant advantage or a springboard for France in the region, these territories actually impose on the French state the heavy responsibility of ensuring their defense and security, as well as that of its vast maritime domain, in a context fraught with challenges related to climate change, growing migration crises, and rising great-power rivalries.

Due to the distance from mainland France and the so-called tyranny of distance in this part of the world (for example, it takes nearly three weeks to sail from Toulon to Singapore, and there is an 18-hour time difference between Papeete and Manila), navigation in the Asia-Pacific presents a considerable logistical challenge that requires careful planning, anticipation and rigorous monitoring. Fuel reserves demand the utmost attention, while the management of freshwater and provisions also requires special care. However, the greatest concern is the unforeseen: technical failures, which in some cases may necessitate rapid external support.

This highlights the importance of the robustness of the ships and the professionalism of the sailors, as well as the logistical network on which a French vessel can rely. This logistical support is found first on land, in foreign ports, and, more rarely, in French ports, but also at sea thanks to the refueling at sea (RAS) capabilities of the French Navy and partner navies. A complex maneuver, RAS with a foreign navy requires prior agreement, interoperability between ships, proven expertise, and trust. The operational capacity of a navy and the success of its operations depend on this logistical agility. Therefore, the role of logistical and technical support points, whether civilian or military, is crucial for the success of any deployment.

### ***Navigating a complex environment***

To enhance its knowledge and understanding of the region, the French Navy must increase patrols in the Asia-Pacific to gather reliable information and establish an independent assessment of the natural environment (oceanography, bathymetry, meteorology, acoustics, and electromagnetics), maritime practices, the behavior of actors present, and their level of operational competence.

This is especially necessary in the South China Sea, where commercial traffic is dense, and various military navies with differing levels of technical capability and aggressiveness, as well as coast guards and fishing fleets, operate. In the case of the Chinese maritime militia, these commercial fleets conduct politically motivated actions commissioned by the Communist Party.

In the South China Sea, Beijing claims nearly 80% of the area and considers international waters to be an integral part of its territory, thereby challenging the principles established by the law of the sea. Chinese forces have established a presence on numerous disputed islets in the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos, which they have

reclaimed and militarized.<sup>4</sup> Considering this area as part of its sovereignty, the Chinese navy systematically tracks any military vessel navigating in the South China Sea, as the authors were able to observe. Thus, exercising freedom of navigation in contested spaces is one of the major challenges for the French Navy and constitutes a central pillar of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

## **Building interoperability with France's partners in the region**

The deployment of a FREMM in the Asia-Pacific also aims to strengthen partnerships in the region. The *Bretagne* represents just one aspect of this cooperation, which is developed initially at the diplomatic level between governments, and extends into the political, economic, cultural and military domains, as seen, for example, with Japan, Singapore and the Philippines.

For the French Navy, the goal is to establish partnerships with local navies through exchanges, joint exercises and port calls. This contributes to the development of mutual understanding and the building of trust, which are essential for solid and stable cooperation.

In the long term, these partnerships will enable collaborative efforts and interoperability to support actions within coalitions for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), combating trafficking and illegal fishing, and upholding freedom of navigation.

During its deployment in the Indo-Pacific, *Bretagne* made port calls in India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Guam, Hawaii and Japan, each time deepening ties with local authorities and navies, thereby strengthening trust and cooperation. Indeed, allowing a foreign, armed military vessel to dock in a port is a significant action, both logistically and politically.

Logistics extend beyond purely technical aspects. Diplomatic-level support agreements (ACSA/RAA) and strategic partnerships allow France to maintain an operational presence in distant regions while ensuring the tactical flexibility necessary to address the challenges posed by complex and unpredictable environments. Establishing new support points in the region with reliable partners is now a strategic priority for France in the Indo-Pacific.

Joint exercises are equally important for fostering mutual understanding and trust between navies, as well as for enhancing interoperability. During its deployment, *Bretagne* conducted exercises with regional partners such as India, Indonesia, the Philippines and Japan, and extra-regional partners like Italy. It also participated in multilateral exercises like Valiant Shield 2024 in the South China Sea and RIMPAC 2024 in the Pacific Ocean alongside 29 nations.<sup>5</sup>

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4. See "China Island Tracker", Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, CSIS, available at: [www.amti.csis.org](http://www.amti.csis.org).

5. The RIMPAC 2024 exercise brought together 25,000 military personnel from 29 participating nations off the coast of Hawaii. See the dedicated RIMPAC website: [www.cpf.navy.mil](http://www.cpf.navy.mil).

## ***Valiant Shield 2024***

In June 2024, the American exercise Valiant Shield was held for the first time in a multilateral format, with participation by Japan, Canada and France. Until then, since its inception in 2006, Valiant Shield had been a US-only joint exercise in the Pacific, focused on interoperability among US forces across all dimensions of the battlefield (land, air, sea, space, cyber).

This year, under the ultimate supervision of the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) in Hawaii, French, Japanese and Canadian officers were integrated at all levels of the command chain. The French FREMM *Bretagne* contributed to this exercise by joining the US Carrier Strike Group 9, centered on the aircraft carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, alongside various US vessels and the Canadian frigate HMCS *Montréal*.

The group patrolled from the south to the north of the South China Sea for a week before crossing the Luzon Strait off the coast of the Philippines. In the Pacific, *Bretagne* conducted further refueling at sea (RAS) exercises and a personnel exchange with the USS *Blue Ridge*, the flagship of the US Seventh Fleet.



Source: Carrier Strike Group Nine with Canadian, French Ships Transit South China Sea Together for Valiant Shield 2024, 6 June 2024, by PO1 Chris Williamson. Image provided by Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DVIDS).

This was the first time that a French first-rate frigate participated in a multilateral exercise in the South China Sea. *Bretagne*'s involvement underscores the building of trust between France and its regional partners, particularly the United States. During the exercise, *Bretagne* was placed under the command of the US military, within the limits and conditions set by Paris, in accordance with its sovereign posture in the Indo-Pacific.

By integrating a French frigate, the Americans also agreed to share certain procedures and encrypted communication channels, allowing them to work effectively with the French. This mutual trust, built through real-world exercises, is essential even among traditional and natural allies like France, the United States and Canada, where habitual cooperation in this region has been limited.

This exercise also serves as a means for France to demonstrate its operational capabilities, thereby gaining credibility and enhancing its expertise by training in unfamiliar formats and environments. Integrating into a US carrier strike group is a highly technical and tactically demanding exercise, especially in a sensitive environment like the South China Sea, where freedom of navigation is contested.

The FREMM *Bretagne* is participating in numerous other exercises with its partners during its deployment, such as RIMPAC in July, the largest multilateral naval exercise. At the time of writing, *Bretagne* was integrated into the Italian carrier strike group, which was centered on the aircraft carrier *Cavour*. They are patrolling the Pacific Ocean alongside Japanese, German, Australian and American ships.<sup>6</sup>

## ***Strategic signaling and strategic communication***

The demonstration of France's action and projection capabilities aligns with a policy of "strategic signaling" directed at partner and competitor armed forces in the region, who possess the technical means to observe France's activities. In other words, through such deployments, the French military also addresses its regional counterparts.

However, while France excels in strategic signaling, it is less active in strategic communication. Although foreign armed forces and intelligence services may pick up on the signals sent by France, governments, strategic communities, the media and public opinion—both internationally and within France—are often unaware of these deployments, with publicly available information being scarce. The Tanskorn mission is just the most recent example of this.

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6. Communication of the German Navy on X: [www.x.com](http://www.x.com); Communication of the French Navy on X: [www.x.com](http://www.x.com).

This lack of strategic communication accompanying French military deployments carries several risks. First, it can create doubt or suspicion among partners and competitors regarding France's intentions. Second, while other powers frequently leverage communication to their advantage, France risks losing control of the narrative to others—whether partners or competitors—who might misrepresent Paris's true intentions. Finally, to make its voice heard and to counter potential manipulations, France needs to better communicate about its deployments to a broader audience, beyond just foreign armed forces.

## Conclusion

Deployments in the Indo-Pacific, such as the deployment of the FREMM *Bretagne* this year as part of the Tanskorn mission, are crucial for enhancing France's capabilities and credibility, enabling it to rise to the level of its ambitions. France must demonstrate that it can project power and collaborate effectively with its partners far from its metropolitan territory to substantiate its ambition to be a responsible and constructive power—or a “balancing power” as per President Macron's doctrine. This includes being capable of protecting its national interests, territories and citizens in the Indo-Pacific while also promoting an international order based on the rule of law.

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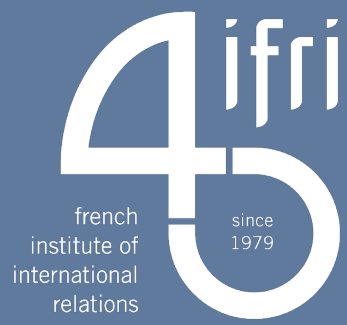
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