



Ramstein Flag 2026: technology, integration, and deterrence in the new NATO strategy

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From June 8 to 19, 2026, the **NATO Allied Air Command (AIRCOM)** will lead the **Ramstein Flag 2026 exercise (RAFL26)**, now in its third edition and a **benchmark in the advanced training of the Alliance**. For the first time since its establishment in 2024, AIRCOM will conduct the entire activity in **full autonomy**, marking an important step in the **operational maturity** of NATO's air command structure.

The exercise will develop along an **extremely wide geographical axis**, from the northern regions of Norway to the southern areas of Spain, simultaneously involving the **northern and southern flanks of the Alliance**. This approach reflects the growing need to operate in a **distributed and coordinated manner across multiple theaters**, in response to **increasingly complex and multidimensional threats**.

Lieutenant General Jason Hinds, Commander of the Allied Air Command, emphasized how RAFL26 represents **“the constant commitment to ensuring the air and space power necessary for the Alliance every day”**. The exercise, in fact, does not just simulate operational scenarios but aims to **strengthen collective deterrence** through the continuous updating of capabilities and procedures.

The training structure follows the model of **“Flag” exercises**, born in 1975, which involve **realistic scenarios with opposing “red” and “blue” forces**. This system allows for the simulation of **advanced threats and highly contested environments**, fostering concrete preparation aligned with the dynamics of modern conflicts. RAFL26 thus fits into this tradition, but expands its scope through **multidomain integration**.

Multidomain, technology, and operational cooperation

One of the distinctive elements of Ramstein Flag 2026 is its **multidomain nature**. Operations will combine **real flight missions** with **simulated activities**, integrating **air, space, land, and naval components**. Strategic priorities include **counter-access and area denial (C-A2AD)**, **integrated air and missile defense (IAMD)**, and **agile combat employment (ACE)**.

The exercise will see the participation of **19 nations** and the deployment of **over 150 aircraft**, including fighters, support platforms, and advanced assets like **AWACS** and **RQ-4D drones**. Operations will be conducted from **more than 15 operational bases** spread across Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Spain, with an average of **about 150 sorties daily**.

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NATO RQ-4D Alliance ground surveillance drone. Source defensenews.com.

A central role will be played by the **Joint Engagement Zone**, a shared operational space where **air and missile defense systems**, both land and naval, will operate in an integrated manner. This approach allows for testing and improving **tactical procedures in complex and dynamic environments**, enhancing the **rapid response capability** of allied forces.

The informational dimension is also crucial: the **continuous sharing of data among Allies** is a key factor for the success of operations. The ability to integrate information from different

domains and platforms indeed improves the **decision-making process** and increases the **effectiveness of missions**.

From lessons learned to NATO's future posture

Ramstein Flag 2026 fits into a broader evolutionary context, marked by the activation of **Enhanced Vigilance Activities**, including **Eastern Sentry** in September 2025 and **Arctic Sentry** in February 2026. These initiatives have helped strengthen **NATO's presence and operational readiness** in the most sensitive sectors of the European continent.

RAFL26 represents a concrete opportunity to **consolidate lessons learned** and refine **tactics, techniques, and procedures**. The goal is to address **continuously evolving threats** through advanced and innovation-oriented training. In this sense, the exercise highlights the **transition of AIRCOM** from a model based on traditional air patrol to a **multidomain air defense**, more flexible and distributed.

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NATO operators in the Arctic environment during the **Arctic Sentry exercise in February 2026**, engaged in surveillance and coordination activities. Source NATO Allied Command Operations.

During the **NATO Air Chiefs Symposium 2026**, Lieutenant General Hinds reiterated the **growing importance of air and space power** as a pillar of Euro-Atlantic security. RAFL26 concretely demonstrates this vision, highlighting **the unity of the Alliance** and the Allies' ability to operate together in **realistic scenarios**.

Multinational cooperation also extends to other domains, with the involvement of **maritime units and special forces**. This integration strengthens **Command and Control (C2)** and helps ensure **stability in the Euro-Atlantic region**. Ultimately, Ramstein Flag 2026 is not just an exercise but a **testing ground for NATO's future**: an Alliance increasingly **interconnected, ready, and resilient** in the face of global challenges.

News link: <https://ac.nato.int/archive/2026/nato-allied-air-command-to-conduct-exercise-ramstein-flag-2026-in-june>