



2025 PLA Pilot Recruitment Cycle

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In accordance with Xi Jinping’s guidance, the modernization of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has prioritized the development of its high-tech aviation capabilities, emphasizing not only the advancement of sophisticated equipment but also the training of highly skilled flight personnel. As part of its military reform, the PLA established six flight institutions within the PLA Army (PLAA), Navy (PLAN), and Air Force (PLAAF) for the training of pilots.¹ Among these institutions, the Aviation University of the Air Force (AUAF) and the Naval Aviation University (NAU) serve as the primary educational institutions that recruit pilot cadets from the general population. Both universities provide foundational professional education before cadets proceed to advanced aircraft training at specialized flight academies, ultimately preparing pilots for the PLAA’s aviation units, the PLAN’s carrier units, and the PLAAF’s diverse aircraft operations.

The Central Military Commission’s (CMC) Military Academic Institution Recruitment Plan outlines the annual recruitment quotas for AUAF and NAU; however, it does not elucidate the specifics of the pilot cadet recruitment cycle (see previous article in this series).¹ Typically, the recruitment process for pilot cadets in the PLAAF and PLAN begins in September or October. Following preliminary and secondary examinations, the CMC approves the recruitment plan based on the number of qualified applicants, usually in March or April of the following year. Notably, the recruitment requirements and timelines differ between the PLAAF and PLAN. This article examines the 2025 recruitment cycle for AUAF and NAU pilot cadets, providing a brief insight into their recruitment processes, training programs, and subsequent career trajectories.

PLAAF Pilot Cadet Recruitment

The PLAAF manages pilot recruitment in collaboration with provincial education departments and public security departments under the guidance of the Ministry of Education

¹ The six military academic institutions for pilot training include PLAA Aviation Academy, PLAN Aviation University, PLAAF Aviation University, PLAAF Shijiazhuang Flight Academy, PLAAF Xi’an Flight Academy, and PLAAF Harbin Flight Academy. They are all deputy corps leader-grade institutions.

(MOE), the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), the Ministry of Finance, and the CMC’s Political Work Department (PWD). Since 1987, the PLAAF has independently recruited for both the PLAA and PLAAF Aviation Corps, and it has supplied a considerable number of flight personnel to the PLAN Aviation Corps.²

The PLAAF executes its pilot cadet recruitment work through its PWD’s PLAAF Pilot Cadet Recruitment Work Bureau (中国人民解放军空军招收飞行学员工作局, hereinafter referred to as the PLAAF Pilot Recruitment Bureau, 空军招飞局).ⁱⁱ The Pilot Recruitment Bureau, established in 1987, is responsible for the PLAAF pilot recruitment work nationwide through its seven selection centers located in Shenyang, Beijing, Lanzhou, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, and Chengdu (see Figure 1).^{3 iii}

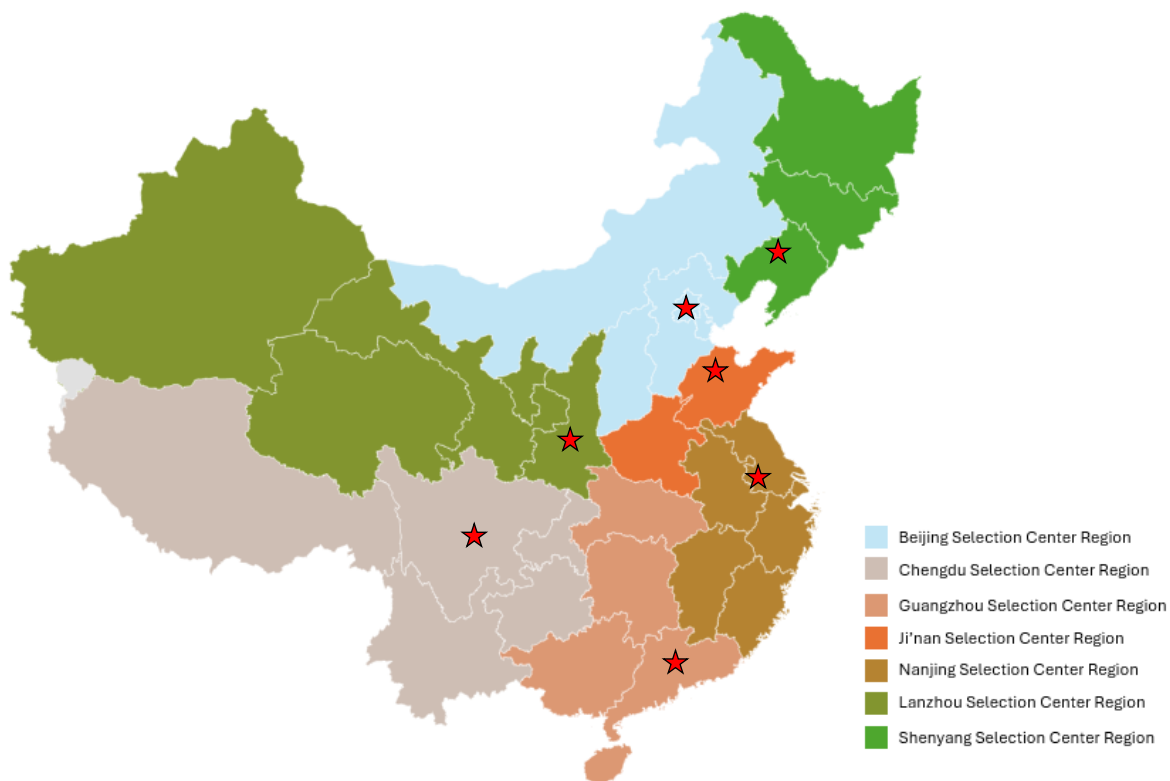


Figure 1: PLAAF Pilot Recruitment Bureau’s Seven Pilot Selection Centers and Jurisdiction

ⁱⁱ The PLAAF Pilot Recruitment Bureau’s official website is 空军招飞网 <http://www.kjzfw.net/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Beijing Selection Center Region (SCR) includes Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Shanxi, and Inner Mongolia. Chengdu SCR includes Chongqing, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Tibet. Guangzhou SCR includes Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan. Jinan SCR includes Shandong and Henan. Nanjing SCR includes Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Jiangxi, and Fujian. Lanzhou SCR includes Gansu, Shaanxi, Qinghai, Ningxia, and Xinjiang. Shenyang SCR includes Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang.

As outlined in the *2025 PLAAF Pilot Recruitment Guide*, published in September 2024, AUAF recruits and selects pilot cadets from three sources of graduates: the Air Force Teenagers Aviation School (AFTAS), high schools, and military academic institutions.^{iv} High school applicants must be between 17 and 20 years old, while graduates from military academic institutions must not exceed the age of 24.

The physical requirements are identical for both categories.

- Applicants’ height should fall within the range of 165 to 185 centimeters.
- Applicants’ weight should be at least 80 percent and no more than 130 percent of the standard weight (standard weight in kilograms = height in centimeters – 110).
- Applicants’ naked visual acuity of both eyes must exceed 0.8 according to the Air Force recruitment standard "C"-shaped vision chart, and no vision correction surgery has been performed.
- Applicants must not wear orthokeratology lenses and must have no color blindness, color weakness, strabismus, or related conditions.⁴

Academic requirements differ, however. High school graduates must major in science-related subjects and study English or Russian as their foreign language. They must achieve a national college entrance examination (Gaokao, 高考) score higher than the admission threshold for key universities in their province. Military academic institution graduates must have completed an undergraduate degree in science, engineering, or military science.

High School Graduates

High school graduates form a significant proportion of applicants for PLAAF pilot cadet recruitment. Applicants undergo a rigorous three-tier selection process comprising preliminary, secondary, and final selection (see Figure 2). Admission decisions are based on the allocated slots outlined in the *2025 Military Academic Institution Recruitment Plan* (2025 年军队院校招生计划) that will be released in June 2025. Only applicants with outstanding comprehensive evaluations will be considered for admission to AUAF.



Figure 2: PLAAF Pilot Recruitment Process for High School Seniors

^{iv} Established by the MOE, the Public Security Bureau, and the PLAAF PWD, AFTAS is a program of 16 high schools that trains teenagers between 14 and 17 years old as future pilot cadets. Graduates from AFTAS will be admitted in AUAF. It has recruited approximately 1,000 cadets from 11 provinces every year since 2015.

For instance, in the Beijing Selection Center region, the recruitment process started in September 2024 with the release of the *Notice for the 2025 North China Air Force Recruitment of Pilot Cadets* (2025 年度华北地区空军招收飞行学院报名须知). Senior high school students who meet the requisite physical and academic standards may submit their applications via the North China Pilot Recruitment WeChat Official Account.⁵

The selection process proceeds in three steps:

1. Preliminary Selection (Ongoing): Applicants undergo physical examinations, including ophthalmology, otolaryngology, and other assessments at municipal-level testing stations in their region.
2. Secondary Selection (December 2024 – February 2025): Qualified candidates proceed to the Beijing Selection Center for physical fitness tests, psychological evaluations, and political assessments.
3. Final Selection (March – June 2025): Remaining candidates undergo comprehensive medical and psychological evaluations.⁶

Subsequently, the seven selection centers will consolidate and submit the data of qualified applicants to the CMC. The CMC PWD and the CMC Training and Administration Department (TAD), in collaboration with the MOE, will publish the 2025 Military Academic Institution Recruitment Plan in June 2025. This document will stipulate the allocated slots for AUAF and NAU by province, autonomous region, and municipality (hereafter identified as regions).

After taking the Gaokao on June 7, 2025, applicants will submit their official applications to AUAF. AUAF's admission decisions are based on Gaokao scores and the allocated recruitment slots in each region.⁷ Letters of admission will be distributed in June 2025, and successful cadets will report to AUAF on August 1, 2025.

Admitted pilot cadets undergo a three-month probation period upon enrolling in AUAF, and only qualified candidates will obtain their student status and military status. There are two different education paths for these pilot cadets: one option is the advanced military education program, and the other one is the “3+1” military-civilian integrated training program.

The advanced military educational program offers pilot cadets a four-year academic curriculum at AUAF, which comprises two years of basic education, 1.5 years of professional studies, and six months of basic flight training.⁸ Upon completion of the program, graduates will receive a bachelor's degree and will have attained the rank of second lieutenant in the PLAAF. If an individual is not suitable for further flight training due to physical reasons, he or she will be transferred to a military ground academy to study undergraduate majors such as air traffic control, with a total study period of four years.

The dual enrollment program, also referred to as the “3+1” program, allows pilot cadets to pursue an undergraduate curriculum in aerospace engineering for three years at Peking University, Tsinghua University, or the Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, but

requires them to complete mandatory military training as flight cadets at AUAF during summer breaks.^v In their fourth year, cadets transition back to AUAF to complete their aerospace theory courses and intensive flight training.⁹ Such dual-status students will receive an undergraduate degree from both AUAF and the civilian university, thereby becoming a first lieutenant.

Subsequently, AUAF graduates will be assigned to the training brigades at one of the three PLAAF flight academies for advanced flight training in bomber, transport, or special mission aircraft trainers. The advanced flight training at flight academies could be a one-year or two-year program depending on the airframe they fly.¹⁰ Upon completion of the advanced flight training at a flight academy, new pilots will be assigned to a combat unit to learn how to fly and fight in fighters. Nevertheless, flight academies have begun to take over the responsibilities for transition training as a part of the PLAAF’s pilot training reform. For instance, fifth-generation fighter J-10 pilots will continue their transition training with J-10s for an additional year before being assigned to an operational unit.¹¹

PLAA pilots who completed their education and training at AUAF will continue their pilot training at the PLAA Aviation Academy. Given that all PLAA pilots are trained as helicopter pilots, PLAA Aviation Academy has become the exclusive institution for helicopter training for both PLAA and PLAAF pilots.

Military Academic Institution Graduates

AUAF also accepts applications from graduates of military academic institutions who are under 24 years of age. In August 2024, the PLAAF submitted its Pilot Cadet Recruitment Plan for military academic institution graduates to the PLA PWD. Once approved, it will be incorporated into the comprehensive 2025 pilot cadet recruitment plan (see Figure 3).

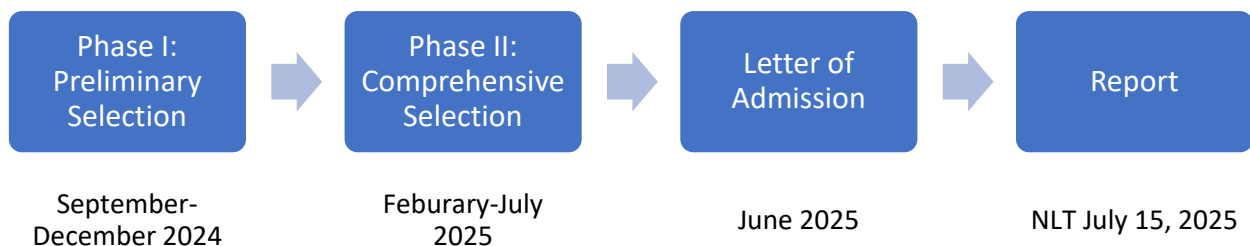


Figure 3: PLAAF Pilot Recruitment Process for Military Academic Institution Seniors

Phase I (September – December 2024) involves advertising, registration, and preliminary selection. Military academic institutions utilize publicity platforms to encourage cadets who demonstrate strong political and ideological, military, academic, professional, physical and

^v The dual enrollment program was initiated by AUAF in 2012 to cultivate cadets excelling in both academic and military domains. Applicants must achieve outstanding Gaokao scores to be admitted by these top institutions and successfully complete the AUAF application process. The selection criteria for these dual-enrollment cadets are exceptionally rigorous. In 2024, over 1,000 students were admitted to AUAF; however, only 90 were selected for the dual-enrollment track.

mental attributes to apply for flight academy. Senior cadets at military academic institutions are eligible to apply, but their applications are subjected to an initial review by their school boards. Once military academies confirm the applicants' qualification, the PLAAF will set up examination stations to conduct preliminary selection to assess the applicants' political background and physical fitness.

Phase II (February – July 2025) includes a physical fitness test, a psychological evaluation, and a comprehensive political assessment. Political stability is regarded as the most crucial criterion. The political review examines the applicant's academic performance, motivation, and family political history, lasting a two-month period from April to May 2025. The PLAAF PWD finalizes selections and issue admission letters in June, with reporting scheduled for July 15, 2025.¹²

Pilot cadets at AUAF do not receive military ranks during their undergraduate years. However, they are classified as junior command cadets and are compensated with military-grade wages, which include regular salary increments. Upon graduation, cadets are awarded corresponding military ranks (specific rank details are currently unknown) and grades and continue their training or join operational units based on their assignments.

PLAN Pilot Cadet Recruitment

The PLAN Pilot Cadet Recruitment Work Office (海军招收飞行学员工作办公室, hereafter referred to as PLAN Pilot Recruitment Office) is responsible for carrying out the recruitment of pilot cadets for the PLAN under the guidance of the MOE, MPS, and the CMC's PWD. Unlike the PLAAF, the PLAN Pilot Recruitment Office does not have subordinate offices to implement its recruitment plan. Instead, it manages and directs the process through its official website.^{vi}

In September 2024, the PLAN Pilot Recruitment Office initiated the 2025 pilot cadet recruitment process, aiming to recruit carrier aircraft pilots from two categories: high school graduates and bachelor's or master's degree holders in a science or engineering discipline. High school graduates must be aged 17 to 20. Bachelor's degree holders must be single and under the age of 24, while master's degree holders must be under the age of 26.¹³

Prior to 2023, the PLAN limited its recruitment of pilot cadets to high school graduates, including those from the Naval Teenagers Aviation School.^{vii} In 2023, this policy was expanded to include individuals with a bachelor's degree, and in 2024, applicants with a master's degree were also considered. Additionally, 2023 marked a historic milestone as the PLAN admitted its first cohort of female carrier aircraft pilot trainees. However, no slots were allocated for female

^{vi} The PLAN Pilot Recruitment Office's official website is <http://www.hjzf.mil.cn/index.html> (中国海军招飞网).

^{vii} NTAS is a program that was established in 2015 to grow future pilot cadets for NAU. It is composed of 14 high schools that recruit middle high graduates from 14 provinces in China.

trainees in the 2024 and 2025 recruitment cycles.¹⁴ Consequently, the eight female pilot trainees admitted in 2023 remain the only female carrier aircraft pilot trainees in the PLAN.

Furthermore, the PLAN adjusted the medical requirements for its pilot cadets in the 2025 PLAN Pilot Recruitment Plan and removed vision correction surgery from the disqualification list.¹⁵ This adjustment aims to improve recruitment efficiency and expand the candidate pool.

The physical eligibility standards are uniform for all applicants, whether high school graduates or bachelor's/ master's degree holders.

- Applicants' height should fall within the range of 165 to 185 centimeters.
- Applicants' weight should be at least 50 kilograms and meet the standard body mass index.
- Applicants' naked visual acuity of both eyes must exceed 0.6 according to the standard "C"-shaped vision chart.
- Applicants with a history of corneal refractive surgery are conditionally eligible but must submit their complete medical records for review.
- Applicants must have no color blindness, color weakness, strabismus, or other conditions.

The recruitment process, training programs, and resettlement procedures for cadets eliminated from the pilot program vary considerably depending on the category in question, reflecting the PLAN's evolving priorities and operational needs.

High School Graduates

High school graduates are required to take the 2025 Gaokao, and they must score higher than the admission score for key universities in their province. Additionally, they are required to choose English as their foreign language subject.

Applicants to the PLAN pilot program must undergo a two-stage selection process, achieving high scores on the Gaokao and flight potential test to gain admission to NAU (see Figure 4). Eligible high school students must complete the required application and physical examination forms and register through their schools. The preliminary selection (October – November 2024) includes basic physical and academic evaluations, and the comprehensive selection (January – April 2025) involves advanced physical examinations, psychological selections, and political assessments. Final admission decisions, based on Gaokao scores and flight potential, will be issued in mid-July 2025 for the flight technology (aviation flight and command) major at NAU.

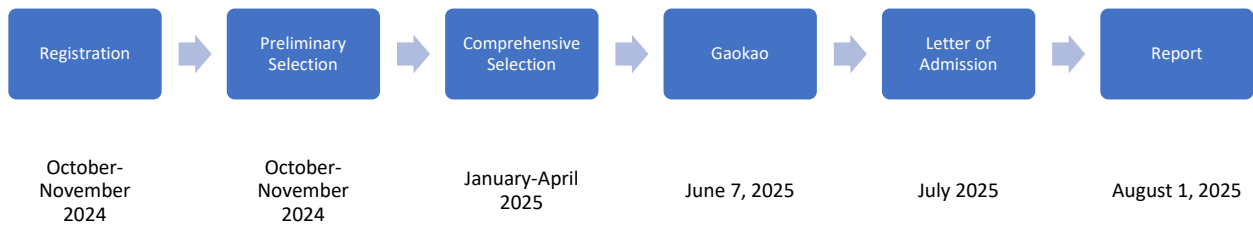


Figure 4: PLAN Pilot Recruitment Process for High School Graduates

The educational program at NAU mirrors that of AUAF, with pilot cadets undergoing a three-month probationary period prior to obtaining their student and military status. The majority of pilot cadets will pursue their undergraduate studies at NAU in Yantai, Shandong. A select group of cadets with exemplary Gaokao scores may study at Peking University, Tsinghua University, or the Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics for three years through a dual enrollment program. After three years of basic undergraduate education, pilot cadets will start a three-year or four-year program in aviation theory and flight training at NAU, based on their specialization as a carrier aircraft pilot or a special mission aircraft aviator. Training includes the operation of primary, intermediate, and advanced trainers and main combat aircraft modifications.¹⁶ In the event that a pilot cadet is unable to continue with the flight training program due to medical reasons, the cadet will be transferred to another major within NAU to continue their undergraduate education.

Bachelor’s or Master’s Degree Holders

Individuals who have obtained a bachelor’s or master’s degree from an accredited institution are required to have completed their studies in a science or engineering major.

Applicants must register on the PLAN Pilot Recruitment Website and submit the required application form to their universities for recommendation and approval (see Figure 5). During the preliminary selection (October – November 2024), applicants provide all necessary documents, including the registration form, physical examination report, and academic records, to the PLAN Pilot Recruitment Office via its official website. The comprehensive selection (January – March 2025) includes physical psychological, and political evaluations at the PLAN Pilot Recruitment Examination Station. Qualified candidates will proceed to a selection flight test in March or April 2025 at a designated location.¹⁷ The PLAN Pilot Recruitment Office will screen and select candidates with top flight scores per direct officer recruitment regulations.

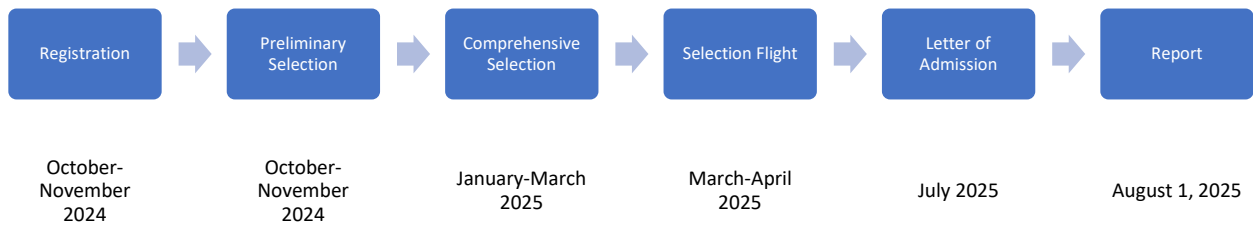


Table 5: PLAN Pilot Recruitment Process for Graduates with Bachelor's or Master's Degrees

Upon admission to NAU, pilot cadets will first complete a two-month introductory training period, after which they will begin three to four years of aviation theory study and flight training. This will be conducted in accordance with the procedures applicable to cadets recruited from high school graduates. Pilot cadets found unsuitable for further training on political, ideological, or disciplinary grounds will be returned to their respective universities or their place of residence. They will be required to reimburse the relevant costs incurred throughout the selection and training process. Those unable to fly for reasons other than those specified will be directed to alternative specialty training programs, provided they meet the requisite criteria for other officer roles.

Conclusion

AUAF and NAU serve as the foundational steppingstone for all PLA pilots, representing the initial stage of a distinguished and rigorous career within the PLAA, PLAN, and PLAAF. While the path to becoming a PLA pilot is undoubtedly arduous and fraught with inherent risks, admission to AUAF or NAU is widely regarded as a gateway to a rewarding and secure career.

In recent years, the PLA has broadened its recruitment initiatives, introducing more inclusive policies such as the acceptance of bachelor's and master's degree holders, relaxed vision requirements for PLAN cadets, and the inclusion of female pilot cadets. These measures illustrate the PLA's dedication to recruiting highly qualified individuals to meet the demands of modernization while maintaining its rigorous standards. The selection process remains highly competitive, with applicants required to demonstrate excellence in academic performance, physical and psychological evaluations, and specialty assessments.

For those who succeed, the AUAF and NAU offer the opportunity to play a vital role in advancing China's modern military capabilities. The PLA pilots undergo comprehensive flight training alongside rigorous academic studies in fields such as aeronautical science, aerospace engineering, or aircraft design. Such a demanding curriculum highlights the high intellectual and technical standards expected of PLA pilots, as well as advanced theory knowledge and practical application. This underscores the PLA's strategic transformation to integrate cutting-edge technological expertise with traditional military training, preparing the PLA to effectively confront the challenges posed by force modernization.

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Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Air University, the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency. Cleared for public release: distribution unlimited.

Endnotes

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