

PLA Air Force Expands Fourth-Generation Transition Training to Another Academy

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Late in December 2022 the People's Liberation Army (PLA) indicated that the training of pilots transitioning from trainers to fourth-generation fighters has expanded to another of the PLA Air Force's (PLAAF) flight academies. Consequently, two of the PLAAF's three flight academies are now conducting transition training to two types of fourth-generation fighters. Although this does not completely relieve operational units of the burden of conducting transition training, the expansion is a part of a broader effort in the PLA to shift the burden of training to the schoolhouse, one that should ultimately improve the efficiency of training in the PLA as a whole.



A pilot candidate takes a commemorative photograph after completing his first solo flight in a J-11B

On December 24, 2022, *Military Report*, the PLA's flagship television news program, reported that pilot candidates undergoing transition training from the JL-10 trainer to the J-11B fighter at the Xi'an Flight Academy "recently" conducted their first solo flights in the latter aircraft, a Chinese copy of the fourth-generation¹ Su-27 Flanker.¹ These pilot candidates were the first group to have undergone transition training at the Xi'an Flight Academy after having completed an accelerated initial training program that the PLAAF implemented in 2020.² The accelerated program eliminates a year of intermediate flight training in less advanced trainers such as the JL-8 and the JL-9, advancing pilot candidates directly from six months of Basic Flight Training in the CJ-6 primary trainer to a year of Advanced Flight Training in the JL-10.³

The broadcast was not the first indication that the Xi'an Flight Academy had begun training personnel transitioning to a fourth-generation fighter. The earliest indication that it had was a July

¹ Mainland Chinese sources identify the J-11 as a "third-generation" fighter because fighter generations are defined differently in the People's Republic of China.

2022 broadcast of *Military Report* that showed “new pilots” at the academy conducting air-to-surface strike training in the J-11.⁴ Although the report did not explicitly state that the “new pilots” were undergoing transition training, it is almost certain that they were because in the PLA’s terminology a “new pilot” is a recent graduate of an initial training program, someone who would next advance to transition training.

Transition training is still primarily the responsibility of operational units receiving these new pilots, but in 2015 the Xi’an and Harbin Flight Academies began training some new pilots transitioning to the third-generation J-7 fighter and the H-6 bomber, respectively.⁵ In 2020 the Shijiazhuang Flight Academy became the first of the PLAAF’s three flight academies to establish a brigade to conduct transition training from the JL-10 to the fourth-generation J-10 fighter, commencing training after the first group of pilot candidates completed the new accelerated training program in 2021.⁶ Therefore, the Xi’an Flight Academy is the second flight academy in the PLAAF to have begun conducting transition training to a fourth-generation fighter, expanding the training of graduates of the accelerated program to another type of fourth-generation fighter.

This was unexpected. The Harbin Flight Academy is likely to have implemented the accelerated training program when it, too, introduced the JL-10 in 2020, but there is no evidence that the Xi’an Flight Academy is training pilot candidates in the JL-10.⁷ In fact, the advanced trainer that was used in a force-on-force exercise that the Xi’an Flight Academy conducted in September 2022 was the JL-9, a trainer that is used in the older initial training program, a program that has not been completely superseded.⁸ Yet there is no evidence that the Harbin Flight Academy is training pilots transitioning to fighters, not to mention fourth-generation fighters.

But although it was unexpected that the Xi’an Flight Academy would be the next to begin training personnel transitioning to fourth-generation fighters, it was expected that such training would expand beyond the Shijiazhuang Flight Academy.⁹ The expansion is part of a broader effort in the PLA to shift the burden of training to the schoolhouse, thereby producing personnel who can immediately undertake their duties upon assignment to an operational unit, and enabling those units to focus their training on advanced subjects and realistic scenarios instead of basic and technical training. The trend can be seen in the PLA Army’s similar effort from 2020 to shift transition training to its own flight academy, in the PLAAF’s introduction of operational types of aircraft to a maintenance training program, and even in the PLAAF’s centralization of basic training.¹⁰ Therefore, although the expansion of transition training to the Xi’an Flight Academy itself may have limited impact, it is a part of an effort that should greatly improve the efficiency of the PLA’s training, redounding to the benefit of the PLA’s readiness.

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Notes

¹ “空军首批教-10 改装歼-11B 飞行学员完成单飞” [The air force’s first group of pilot candidates transitioning from the JL-10 to the J-11B complete solo flights], 彭旭 [Peng Xu], 杨璐 [Yang Lu], 犹艳伟 [You Yanwei], 张磊 [Zhang Lei], and 朱畅宇 [Zhu Changyu], 军事报道 [Military Report], aired December 24, 2022, on CCTV-7, accessed January 3, 2023, http://www.js7tv.cn/video/202212_293037.html.

² Derek Solen, “Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force,” China Aerospace Studies Institute, February 16, 2021, accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Articles/Article-Display/Article/2502985/initial-fighter-pilot-training-in-the-pla-air-force/>, 3-4.

³ Derek Solen, “Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force,” China Aerospace Studies Institute, February 16, 2021, accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Articles/Article-Display/Article/2502985/initial-fighter-pilot-training-in-the-pla-air-force/>, 3-4.

⁴ “地靶实弹训练 强化新飞行员实战能力” [Live-fire training against ground targets strengthens new pilots’ capability for real war], 彭旭 [Peng Xu], 杨璐 [Yang Lu], 犹艳伟 [You Yanwei], 崔保亮 [Cui Baoliang], and 张磊 [Zhang Lei], 军事报道 [Military Report], aired July 23, 2022, on CCTV-7, accessed July 25, 2022, http://www.js7tv.cn/video/202207_283487.html.

⁵ Derek Solen, “PLA Air Force Shifts Transition Training to the Schoolhouse,” China Aerospace Studies Institute, November 3, 2021, accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Articles/Article-Display/Article/2831138/pla-air-force-shifts-transition-training-to-the-schoolhouse/>, 1.

⁶ Derek Solen, “PLA Air Force Shifts Transition Training to the Schoolhouse,” China Aerospace Studies Institute, November 3, 2021, accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Articles/Article-Display/Article/2831138/pla-air-force-shifts-transition-training-to-the-schoolhouse/>, 2.

⁷ Derek Solen, “Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force,” China Aerospace Studies Institute, February 16, 2021, accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Articles/Article-Display/Article/2502985/initial-fighter-pilot-training-in-the-pla-air-force/>, 4.

⁸ “空军西安飞行学院：实兵对抗演练 锤炼官兵协同能力” [The air force’s Xi’an Flight Academy: a force-on-force field exercise tempers the capability of the officers and men to cooperate], 杨子立 [Yang Zili], 严巧宇 [Yan Qiaoyu], 梁嘉轩 [Liang Jiaxuan], 吴攀 [Wu Pan], 崔保亮 [Cui Baoliang], and 秦建伟 [Qin Jianwei], 正午国防军事 [National Defense and Military Affairs at Noon], aired September 20, 2022, on CCTV-7, accessed September 20, 2022, <https://tv.cctv.com/2022/09/20/VIDESygCxia4lDmmWmdfn47Q220920.shtml>; 杨子立 [Yang Zili] and 梁嘉轩 [Liang Jiaxuan], “长空砺剑 向战奋飞” [Sharpening the sword in the vast sky, flying vigorously to battle], 解放军画报 [Liberation Army Pictorial], October 1, 2022, accessed January 10, 2023, http://www.plapic.com.cn/jfjhb/fh_213030/16195309.html.

⁹ Derek Solen, “PLA Air Force Shifts Transition Training to the Schoolhouse,” China Aerospace Studies Institute, November 3, 2021, accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Articles/Article-Display/Article/2831138/pla-air-force-shifts-transition-training-to-the-schoolhouse/>, 2.

¹⁰ China Aerospace Studies Institute, *PLA Aerospace Power: A Primer on Trends in China’s Military Air, Space, and Missile Forces*, 3rd ed. (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2022), 88-89; 高振兴 [Gao Zhenxing] and 杨帆 [Yang Fan], “新型直升机‘飞进’课堂” [New type of helicopter ‘flies into’ classroom], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], December 17, 2022, accessed January 5, 2023, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-12/17/content_330029.htm; Daniel Salisbury and Kenneth W. Allen, “The Centralization of the PLA Air Force’s Basic and Technical Training,” China Aerospace Studies Institute, November 21, 2022, accessed January 13, 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Articles/Article-Display/Article/3224274/the-centralization-of-the-pla-air-forces-basic-and-technical-training/>.