

## United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 11, 2026

Ms. Ha Nguyen McNeill  
Senior Official Performing the Duties of the Administrator  
Transportation of Security Administration  
6595 Springfield Center Drive,  
Springfield, VA 20598-6020.

Dear Ms. McNeill:

I write today to express concern over Chinese nationals receiving flight training in the United States. As you know, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) employs a strategy of Military-Civil Fusion (MCF), which deliberately erases lines between the military and the commercial. As one study put it, MCF has “helped Chinese enterprises, both state-owned and nominally private, to capture significant global market share in advanced industries, while also concentrating the party’s capacity to mobilize national resources in times of emergency and war.”<sup>1</sup>

The aviation sector is no exception. Speaking at the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chinese aviation industry, former Vice Premier Liu He promised that “China will transform itself into an aviation power,” both achieving self-sufficiency through domestic innovation and enriching its talent pool.<sup>2</sup> As Xi Jinping put it, echoing former Premier Wen Jiabao, “enabling China’s large aircraft to soar through the skies embodies the nation’s will, the people’s dreams, and their aspirations.”<sup>3</sup>

Standing in the way of China’s aviation ambitions is a shortage of pilots. According to the International Trade Administration, China is expected to require 130,000 commercial and general aviation pilots by 2043 to meet the demands of its aviation sector.<sup>4</sup> This shortage extends to the Chinese military. In 2024, the People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF)’s Shijiazhuang Flight Academy shortened its training cycle from four years to three to accelerate training, while the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has lowered standards to attract a broader pool of candidate pilots.<sup>5</sup> Chinese state media has likewise

---

<sup>1</sup> Liza Tobin, Addis Goldman & Katherine Kurata, “Beyond Fusion: Preparing for Systems Rivalry with China”, *War on the Rocks*, Aug. 13, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/08/beyond-fusion-preparing-for-systems-rivalry/>.

<sup>2</sup> “China vows to become an aviation power as industry marks 70th anniversary,” *CGTN News*, April 16, 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-04-16/China-vows-to-become-an-aviation-power-as-industry-marks-70-years-ZvUApUvGwM/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> 한겨레, “中国‘航空崛起’, 首架国产客机载客飞行”, *The Hankyoreh*, May 30, 2023, <https://china.hani.co.kr/arti/international/12678.html>.

<sup>4</sup> International Trade Administration, “China Aviation Education Pilot Training,” March 2025, <https://www.trade.gov/market-intelligence/china-aviation-education-pilot-training>.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Solen, “Modernization of Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force Proceeds Apace,” USAF China Aerospace Studies Institute, November 18, 2024, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/PLAAF/2024-11->

highlighted pilot recruitment from non-traditional pipelines, noting that expanded recruitment is essential to meeting demand stemming from China's growing fleet of aircraft carriers.<sup>6</sup>

According to new reporting by investigative journalist Peter Schweizer, China needs roughly 5000 pilot cadets per year to meet both military and civilian demand, while China's domestic flight schools can produce only about 1200.<sup>7</sup> To help address this gap, prospective Chinese pilots are seeking out training in the United States.

The Chinese government's commercial aviation regulatory authority, the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC), approves flight schools in the United States to train Chinese pilots.<sup>8</sup> One of those CAAC-approved institutions is the AeroGuard Flight Training Center in Phoenix, Arizona. In 2022, AeroGuard signed a long-term partnership with Hong Kong's Cathay Pacific to establish a pilot training pipeline.<sup>9</sup> Chinese state media boasts that AeroGuard's student body is nearly two-thirds Chinese national.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, in Atwater, California, the Sierra Academy of Aeronautics reportedly trains 800 Chinese pilots per year.<sup>11</sup> As a Sierra Academy executive put it, "Because Sierra Academy has been working with the Chinese government, institutions, airlines – we have all the right contacts to put this program in place."<sup>12</sup>

Each Chinese citizen trained at an American flight school helps break through China's pilot bottleneck. While many of these students will go on to civilian and not military careers, the Chinese Communist Party, through its Military-Civil Fusion strategy, has foreclosed our ability to view this training with the benefit of a doubt. The more Chinese citizens there are with aviation training, the more options the Chinese military has to recruit pilots and instructors for its malign purposes.

In the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Congress recognized that foreign nationals training at American flight schools could pose a threat to our national security. The Vision 100-Century of Aviation Reauthorization Act assigned responsibility to the Secretary of Homeland Security to vet prospective foreign national flight school candidates for potential threats to national security.<sup>13</sup> Recognizing that training at American flight schools may be useful to individuals from foreign militaries, Congress explicitly exempted foreign military pilots endorsed by the Pentagon from these requirements.

---

[18%20Modernization%20of%20Fighter%20Pilot%20Training%20in%20PLAAF%20Proceeds%20Apace.pdf?ver=UohKp62x8xot-laygKRXCg%3d%3d.](https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202507/1339264.shtml)

<sup>6</sup> Liu Xuanzun & Liang Rui, "PLA Navy's carrier-based fighter pilot recruitments reach historic high", *Global Times*, July 25, 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202507/1339264.shtml>.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Schweizer, *The Invisible Coup* (2026), HarperCollins, p.103

<sup>8</sup> *China Daily*, "Trainee Pilots Qualify for Their Wings in the U.S.," distributed via *The Wall Street Journal* partner content, reporting that Chinese airlines send cadet pilots to overseas flight schools approved by the Civil Aviation Administration of China, available at <https://partners.wsj.com/chinadaily/chinawatch/trainee-pilots-qualify-for-their-wings-in-u-s/>.

<sup>9</sup> "AeroGuard Flight Training Center Signs Long Term Agreement With Cathay Pacific, Plans to Train Hundreds of Cadet Pilots at Its Phoenix, Arizona Campus", *GlobeNewswire*, December 5, 2022. <https://financialpost.com/globe-newswire/aeroguard-flight-training-center-signs-long-term-agreement-with-cathay-pacific-plans-to-train-hundreds-of-cadet-pilots-at-its-phoenix-arizona-campus>.

<sup>10</sup> *China Daily*, "Trainee Pilots Qualify for Their Wings in the U.S."

<sup>11</sup> Schweizer, *The Invisible Coup*, p. 104

<sup>12</sup> Ramona Giwargis, "Sierra Academy of Aeronautics moves ahead with \$30 million project at Castle Airport in Atwater," *Merced Sun-Star*, December 2013, <https://www.mercedsunstar.com/news/business/article3281810.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Public Law, "Vision 100-Century of Aviation Reauthorization Act", December 2003, <https://www.congress.gov/108/plaws/publ176/PLAW-108publ176.pdf>.

Today, the Transportation Security Administration implements this requirement through the Flight Training Security Program (FTSP), which includes a Security Threat Assessment to determine if a pilot candidate poses a threat to transportation or national security.<sup>14</sup> While TSA currently assesses risk based on immigration records, terror watchlists, and criminal history, the scale of the threat posed by the CCP and other foreign adversaries clearly warrants consideration as an additional factor.

Therefore, I respectfully request that TSA update the Flight Training Security Program to preclude individuals from foreign adversary nations, such as China, from attending flight training schools in the United States. We must ensure that American flight training programs serve American interests—not Xi Jinping’s dreams.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jim Banks". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Jim Banks  
U.S. Senator

---

<sup>14</sup> Federal Register, “Flight Training Security Program” May 2024, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/05/01/2024-08800/flight-training-security-program#footnote-3-p35581>.