

Chinese Aircrew Visa Requirements

American Airlines requires all Los Angeles- and Dallas-based Boeing 777 and Boeing 787 pilots to obtain a Chinese visa. Chinese consulates are conditioning the issuance or renewal of aircrew visas on disclosure of details regarding pilots' active-duty military service, regardless of whether the applicant has separated from the military or continues to serve in a reserve capacity.

Upon application for a new or renewed Chinese visa, pilots are required to disclose their current or prior military affiliation and that of their spouse. Affirmative responses draw additional intrusive questioning, including questions about their military branch, military specialty, exact dates of service, addresses of postings, and detailed explanation of any time spent in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Ghana, Nigeria, Israel, Turkey, Lebanon, Kenya, Sri Lanka, DR Congo, Bangladesh, Iraq, and Iran. In addition to this data request, the Chinese consulate requires all U.S. military members to include a copy of the applicant's Department of Defense (DOD) Form 214 – the accurate, detailed, and official record of a servicemember's active-duty military service. American Airlines employs over 350 pilots who are required to obtain a Chinese visa that are current or former military service members. Some of these service members possess top secret TS/SCI clearances, have worked on war plans for the Pacific Command Theater, and are or were general officers in the military. Based on demographics and seniority, a significant percentage of commercial pilots flying regularly scheduled service into China have prior military service or continue to serve in the military reserves. For some carriers, this number is more than 40 percent.

It appears that this is a coordinated policy by the Chinese government. While this policy seems to have been implemented first at the Los Angeles consulate, all Chinese consular offices across the United States are now making these demands, with a large uptick over the last nine months in Chinese consular rejections of crew visas, holds on processing, or demands for further information—all based upon a pilot's military background. Our pilots are concerned that any response they provide could be crosschecked against information derived from previous, extensive hacks of government information systems. It further appears that the Chinese government has reserved this intrusive military history questioning for U.S. carriers. We have learned from informal contacts with pilot associations in Europe, Asia, the United Kingdom, and Canada that China does not ask these questions of applicants from other national carriers or nationalities.

We understand that some military commanders are advising airline pilots in active service not to provide any military service background information to any country that requests it, and that the DOD may advise active service personnel not to enter China as a result of these demands. Should that occur, flying by U.S. carriers may be curtailed as pilots apply for new visas and existing pilot visas come up for renewal, adversely affecting the additional flights to China that U.S. carriers assume will be made available as a reciprocal action to the DOT order that authorized additional Chinese carrier passenger services on Aug. 11, 2023. This is clearly not a solution. It does not resolve the concerns raised by pilots with prior military experience but no continuing affiliation, who would not be subject to a DOD ban on travel but would still be subject to Chinese government officials' detailed questioning regarding their military service.

These overly intrusive background requests are alarming to the crews who deserve our support as they fly and serve on the planes that connect the United States, China, and the rest of the world. We understand that interagency discussions are underway among the highest levels of the Departments of State, Defense, Transportation, Homeland Security, and others. We sincerely appreciate those efforts and believe this situation demands continued urgent interagency consultations and a resolute response by our government. In our view, there is a continuing need to focus on this issue to prevent a breakdown in both passenger and cargo transportation to and from China. We request continued urgent efforts to resolve this important issue.

Of final note, although we represent the concerns of the pilots of American Airlines, we acknowledge that flight attendants and other aviation employees with prior military service are subjected to similar inquiries, and this is a broader issue for the military as well as our industry.

For questions or additional information, please email GAC-Chairman@alliedpilots.org.