



WORKING PAPER

**SEVENTH WORLDWIDE AIR TRANSPORT CONFERENCE
(ATCONF/7)**

Montréal, HQ, 16 to 20 November 2026

Agenda Item 3: Strengthening regulatory and institutional frameworks

3.2: Enhancing air connectivity through progressive economic and regulatory aviation frameworks for international air transport

ENHANCING INTERNATIONAL AIR CONNECTIVITY AND INBOUND PASSENGER FACILITATION THROUGH CROSS-SECTORAL COLLABORATION

(Presented by China)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2024, the Chinese government has focused on resuming and expanding international air services as a key priority. Leveraging the tourism work coordination mechanism and the national air transport facilitation mechanism, it has coordinated efforts across different stakeholders involving civil aviation, foreign affairs, immigration, customs, culture and tourism, finance, commerce, railways to jointly optimize flight supply, visa transit policies, inbound payment services, tourism products, and ground shuttle services. In 2025, China operated 345,000 international passenger flights, averaging over 6,500 flights per week, serving 83 countries. Inbound foreign visitors reached 82.035 million, of which 30.08 million entered visa-free. Practice shows that the integration and synergy among various economic sectors are crucial for enhancing the quality and efficiency of international air transport, and serve as an effective pathway for building a progressive economic and regulatory framework for aviation to improve air connectivity. These practices are aligned with the “interconnected transport system” goal of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Strategic Plan 2026–2050, as well as the policy orientations set forth in Assembly Resolutions A42-26 and A42-17 regarding cross-sectoral coordination and seamless travel.

Action: The Conference is invited to:

- a) note the practices and outcomes contained in this paper regarding China’s efforts to enhance international air connectivity through cross-sectoral collaboration;
- b) affirm the positive role of policy coordination in areas such as international flight supply, inbound clearance facilitation, payment services, tourism supply, and intermodal transport in improving air connectivity; and
- c) invite Member States to voluntarily refer to the initiatives in Part 3 of this document, in accordance with their respective national laws, security standards, and development realities.

Strategic Goals:

This working paper relates to Strategic Goals — *The Economic Development of Air Transport Assures the Delivery of Economic Prosperity and Societal Well-being for All*,

¹ English and Chinese versions provided by China.

	<i>Aviation Delivers Seamless, Accessible and Reliable Mobility for All and No Country Left Behind.</i>
<i>Financial implications:</i>	The activities referred to in this paper are expected to be undertaken within the resources available in the 2026-2028 Regular Budget and/or from extra-budgetary contributions.
<i>References:</i>	ICAO Strategic Plan 2026–2050; Assembly Resolution A42-17; Assembly Resolution A42-26; Doha Declaration on Facilitation of International Air Transport in 2025.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Air transport serves as a vital foundation for international people-to-people exchanges, economic and trade cooperation, and tourism development. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Strategic Plan 2026–2050 envisions a prosperous, interconnected, and affordable integrated transport system, while Assembly Resolution A42-26 recognizes that air transport can drive economic and social development through tourism and trade. Air connectivity is not merely an industry-specific issue and it must also be aligned with national policies on opening-up and tourism.

1.2. Recent practices in the recovery of international air transport have shown that traffic rights and capacity are merely basic conditions for connectivity. Border clearance, payment environments, destination facilities, and intermodal transport connections all affect passengers' demand and the sustainable operation of routes. Assembly Resolution A42-26 calls for strengthening cross-sectoral coordination in the aviation economy, while Assembly Resolution A42-17 advocates for multi-party collaboration among immigration, customs, public health to implement integrated aviation facilitation.

1.3. Since 2024, China has leveraged its existing coordination mechanisms to promote multi-sector collaboration in support of international aviation recovery and inbound tourism development, forming an integrated policy package encompassing “international route cultivation – visa transit facilitation – payment support – aviation-culture-tourism integration – air-rail intermodal transport.” This practice is consistent with the Doha Declaration on Facilitation of International Air Transport and the requirements of Assembly Resolution A42-17 regarding national coordination and seamless travel.

2. CHINA’S CROSS-SECTORAL COORDINATION PRACTICES FOR ENHANCING AIR CONNECTIVITY

2.1. Coordinating the recovery of international flights with policy support

2.1.1. The civil aviation sector has established a dedicated task force for resuming and increasing international flights, coordinating with diplomatic, immigration, customs and other relevant authorities to provide better policy environment for airlines operations in China.

2.1.2. In 2024, China’s average weekly international passenger flights reached 5,714, a year-on-year significant increase of 96.0 per cent, equivalent to approximately 75.0 per cent of the 2019. In 2025, the average weekly international passenger flights rose to 6,607, up 15.6 per cent year on year, reaching 86.7 per cent of the 2019. These flights served 83 countries, nine more than in 2019.

2.2. Optimizing visa-free transit policies to reduce the institutional costs of cross-border travel

2.2.1. Diplomatic, immigration, customs, and civil aviation sectors have worked in coordination to improve unilateral visa-free, reciprocal visa-free, and visa-free transit policies. In December 2024, the visa-free transit period was uniformly extended to 240 hours, with expanded application ports and activity areas. As of the first half of 2026, there are 50 countries eligible for unilateral visa-free access, 29 countries with full reciprocal visa-free arrangements, and 65 ports applying the 240-hour visa-free transit policy.

2.2.2. Ports have promoted the one-window processing of transit clearance and border inspection procedures, and have introduced online declaration for arrival cards, intelligent inspection, and multilingual consultation services. In 2025, foreign arrivals and departures reached 82.035 million, of which 30.08 million were visa-free foreign arrivals, accounting for 73.1 per cent of all inbound foreign travellers and representing a year-on-year increase of 49.5 per cent, providing a stable passenger base for route operations. These measures reflect the implementation of Assembly Resolution A42-17 and achieve a policy balance between border security control and travel facilitation.

2.3. Improving the service chain for inbound payment and departure tax refunds

2.3.1. Building a multi-tiered inbound payment system featuring “large payments by card, small payments by QR code, and cash as a fallback”. Multiple sectors have coordinated to optimize the acceptance environment for foreign cards, simplify the process for binding overseas bank cards to domestic mobile payment services, and ensure cash services at key locations. In 2025, over 10 million inbound tourists experienced domestic mobile payments through methods such as “domestic binding of foreign cards” and “domestic use of foreign e-wallets”, and payment service demonstration zones were established at airports.

2.3.2. Upgrading departure tax refund services simultaneously. By the end of 2025, a total of 453 tax-refund stores and 58 tax-refund outlets had been added at gateway airports. The facilitation of payment and tax refund services enhanced the consumption experience for inbound travellers, helped aviation drive the development of tourism and trade, and aligned with the ICAO goal of building an accessible air transport system.

2.4. Deepening the integration of aviation, culture, and tourism, and expanding the reach of airline routes through air-rail intermodal transport

2.4.1. In 2025, the civil aviation sector and the cultural-tourism sector jointly advanced the integration of aviation, culture, and tourism, developing signature products centered on inbound route networks and airport-based tourism services. In response to the current concentration of international flights at gateway airports, pilot projects for air-rail intermodal transport were launched. These initiatives encouraged airlines and railways to coordinate across ticketing sales, itinerary notifications, and full-journey passenger services. Additionally, the pre-sale period of railway tickets was extended on a pilot basis to better accommodate the travel habits of overseas visitors.

2.4.2. Air-rail intermodal transport can expand aviation network coverage at a relatively low cost. This approach aligns with the goal of the interconnected transport system set forth in the Strategic Plan 2026–2050, and is consistent with the orientation of Assembly Resolution A42-26, which encourages the coordinated development of multiple transport modes.

2.4.3. The civil aviation sector, in collaboration with the cultural-tourism sector, carried out promotional campaigns for inbound tourism routes. A total of 95 inbound charter flights were operated, and 16 premium inbound routes were selected. Aviation resource allocation was integrated with passenger source cultivation and destination marketing to enhance connectivity.

2.5. Key experience: Developing full-journey solutions through cross-sectoral collaboration

2.5.1. Improving aviation connectivity does not require establishing new institutions; the key lies in leveraging existing coordination mechanisms to build synergies among different sectors. Flight resumption addresses accessibility, visa transit facilitation ensures smoother entry, payment improvement and cultural-tourism supporting services guarantee destination experience, and air-rail intermodal transport expands service coverage. By relying on issue checklists, dedicated task coordination, pilot validation, and data-driven assessment, we can achieve compounding effects of policy measures.

2.5.2. The core idea that the key experience is replicable and promoted is as follows: focus on the passenger's complete travel chain, build upon existing coordination mechanisms, rely on market data to evaluate outcomes, and adopt a pilot-first approach with gradual rollout. Member states with limited resources may choose to start with a single portal airport, key routes, or prominent pain points as a breakthrough. This idea is consistent with the holistic coordination and continuous improvement advocated in relevant ICAO Resolutions.

3. RECOMMENDATION

3.1. Based on the above discussion, it is recommended that the conference:

- a) recommend that the ICAO strengthen cooperation with the UN Tourism, the World Customs Organization (WCO), as well as the International Air Transport Association (IATA), Airports Council International (ACI), the International Union of Railways (UIC), through relevant panels to study and develop a voluntary toolkit on air connectivity and passenger facilitation. The toolkit could cover areas such as the division of responsibilities among sectors, identification of passenger's pain points, pilot programs at ports of entry, coordinated development of air routes and destination markets, and intermodal transport across different modes of transportation.
- b) encourage Member States to explore voluntary "connectivity cooperation packages" in bilateral and regional aviation cooperation. Without prejudice to their national sovereignty and security, and without contravening existing air transport agreements, they may combine and apply measures such as traffic rights access, transit facilitation, airport services, payment facilitation, promotion of destination tourism, and intermodal transport, so as to enhance the sustainable operational capabilities of new air routes and amplify the catalytic role of aviation in driving tourism and economic growth; and
- c) encourage Member States to carry out small-scale pilot programs. Each country may, in light of its own specific circumstances, select portal airports, cross-border corridors, or key air routes to conduct initial trials in specific areas such as transit clearance, inbound payment services, air-rail integration, and multilingual services, and then scale up progressively after data-based assessment. ICAO Regional Offices may provide technical assistance to facilitate the implementation of the goal of "No Country Left Behind".

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