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CHINA'S CONTINUOUS EFFORTS TO PROMOTE OPEN IMMIGRATION POLICIES: A MODEL FOR GLOBAL AIR TRAVEL FACILITATION

(Presented by China)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper presents a series of streamlined procedures and facilitation policies adopted by China in immigration management to fulfil its obligations under the Convention to promote global air travel facilitation. It also outlines the targeted measures taken to ensure effective implementation and the remarkable results achieved, demonstrating the Chinese government's firm commitment to advancing high-level opening-up and offering a "China Approach" that other Member States can refer to.

<i>Strategic Goals:</i>	This paper relates to Strategic Goal <i>Aviation Delivers Seamless, Accessible and Reliable Mobility for All</i> .
<i>Financial implications:</i>	No additional resources are required for the activities mentioned in this paper.
<i>References:</i>	Annex 9 — <i>Facilitation</i>

¹ English and Chinese versions provided by China.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) explicitly requires in Annex 9 — *Facilitation to the Convention on International Civil Aviation* that all Contracting States maximize clearance efficiency and facilitate efficient cross-border travel while ensuring safety. As a founding Contracting State and Part I Member State of the ICAO Council, China has always actively fulfilled its obligations under the Convention by leveraging the implementation of *Facilitation* as an important measure to support the country's high-level opening-up. Notably, since the establishment of China's National Immigration Administration in 2018, China has consistently pursued a steady expansion of institutional opening up in immigration management, continuously streamlined government services and facilitated port clearance. Through systematic policy design and refined process restructuring, China has built a multi-layer visa-free facilitation system and tried to become a global model for air travel facilitation.

2. POLICY UPGRADES: BUILDING A MULTI-TIERED VISA-FREE POLICIES SYSTEM

2.1 In recent years, China has systematically established a multi-tiered and broadly applicable visa-free facilitation policies system, providing extensive travel convenience for foreign passengers.

2.2 Ongoing Expansion of the “Visa-Free Circle of Friends”

2.2.1 Comprehensive Mutual Visa-Free Policy: China has realized comprehensive mutual visa exemption with 28 countries and reached mutual visa-free agreements covering different passport types with 157 countries and regions, including major global economies and emerging markets.

2.2.2 Unilateral Visa-Free Policy: Since 2023, China has implemented multiple rounds of unilateral visa exemption trials for ordinary passport holders from 47 countries, facilitating their entry to and short stay in China.

2.2.3 Regional Visa-Free Policies: The implementation of a visa-free policy for nationals from 59 countries entering Hainan Province and a 15-day visa-free entry policy for group cruise liner tourists at home ports in coastal provinces have promoted the development of “air + cruise” multi-modal tourism.

2.3 In-Depth Optimization of Transit Visa Exemption

2.3.1 The duration of visa-free transit has been extended and its scope expanded. The permitted stay for foreign travelers eligible for visa-free transit has been extended from the original 72/144 hours to 240 hours, with inter-provincial regional collaboration implemented. The number of applicable ports has increased from 39 to 60, with the coverage now expanded from 19 to 24 provinces, and the list of applicable countries has been increased to 55.

2.3.2 Transit Procedures have been further simplified. In January 2024, the policy of 24-hour direct transit without immigration procedures was implemented at 9 international hub airports, including Beijing Capital Airport, Shanghai Pudong Airport and Guangzhou Baiyun Airport, streamlining procedures for transit passengers.

2.4 Further Simplification of Aircraft Entry and Exit Procedures

2.4.1 Aircraft inspection procedures have been streamlined. Airlines that have implemented electronic declaration are exempted from submitting paper declaration documents. Except for risk control,

abnormal declaration and other special cases, airport immigration authorities will no longer conduct boarding inspections, helping airlines reduce costs and improve efficiency.

2.4.2 Procedures for cargo flights have been facilitated. Under a new facilitation measure, cargo crew not leaving the restricted area of the port within 24 hours are exempted from immigration procedures. This allows inspection resources to be prioritized toward supporting airport cargo hubs.

3. MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH: ENHANCING PASSENGER CLEARANCE EFFICIENCY

3.1 Multi-Party Collaboration to Increase Policy Awareness

3.1.1 Strengthening promotion and publicity. Publicity efforts have been made on both traditional and new media platforms; communication videos introducing the visa-free policy have been launched on various overseas media platforms, demonstrating visa-free application procedures and attracting millions of views.

3.1.2 Enhancing inquiry response services. By utilizing the 12367 immigration service hotline, round-the-clock immigration policy consultation services are provided to address policy-related inquiries, making it easier for travelers to access immigration-related information and advice.

3.2 Localization of Technical Standards

3.2.1 Fully implementing the interactive Advance Passenger Information (iAPI) system. The system conducts risk assessments based on pre-obtained information of inbound passengers, provides real-time pre-clearance instructions and achieves a balance between rapid clearance and precise regulatory oversight.

3.2.2 Applying the Traveller Identification Programme (TRIP). Electronic passports and biometric technologies are widely promoted and adopted, with comprehensive application of facial recognition systems to facilitate swift and convenient passenger clearance.

3.3 Collaboration Among Different Authorities to Advance the Implementation of Facilitation Policies

3.3.1 Port clearance facilitation measures have been jointly introduced. The General Administration of Customs, the National Immigration Administration and the Civil Aviation Administration of China have jointly issued a document introducing 16 facilitation measures across five areas, including serving opening-up initiatives, promoting trade development and facilitating personnel exchanges, to streamline procedures and promote the implementation of traveler-friendly policies.

3.3.2 A new ecosystem for inbound tourism has been built on all fronts. In line with the continuous upgrading of port facilitation policies, supporting services for inbound tourism are consistently optimized to build a new ecosystem for inbound tourism and attract more international tourists to visit and experience China.

4. NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENTS: POLICY DIVIDENDS CONTINUE TO BE RELEASED

4.1 Sustained Growth in Inbound and Outbound Traffic Volume

4.1.1 Surge in Inbound Visitor Numbers: in 2024, the number of foreign passengers entering and exiting China reached 64.882 million, an increase of 82.9 per cent year-on-year. Among them, visa-free entries accounted for 20.115 million, a year-on-year increase of 112.3 per cent.

4.1.2 Sharp Rise in Transit Passengers: in 2024, the number of travelers eligible for visa-free transit policy increased by 113.5 per cent year-on-year. Nearly one-fifth of inbound tourists visited China two or more times within the year, with source countries expanding from traditional neighboring states to long-haul markets in Europe.

4.2 Notable Economic Benefits

4.2.1 Tourism consumption has upgraded. According to data from travel platforms, inbound travel orders by foreign tourists in 2024 increased threefold year-on-year, with tourists applying for visa exemption accounting for over 30 per cent of total inbound visitors. Famous tourist cities such as Huangshan, Wuyishan and Zhangjiajie saw a 21.6 per cent year-on-year growth in visits by foreign nationals.

4.2.2 Active commercial activities have been observed. In 2024, 59 000 new foreign-invested enterprises were established nationwide, a year-on-year increase of 9.9 per cent. The European Union Chamber of Commerce in China described the visa exemption policy as a “tangible measure to boost business confidence” and an important friendly signal from China to Europe amid complex geopolitical context.

4.3 Improved International Image and Enhanced Soft Strength

4.3.1 Social media engagement continues to grow. The hashtag “#ChinaTravel” amassed nearly 1 billion video views on overseas social media platforms. Phrases such as “city or not” and “Fly to China after work on Friday” have become international buzzwords. Over 60 per cent of foreign visitors cited “experiencing Chinese culture” as their primary purpose of visit.

4.4 Broad recognition has been received from international organizations. Zurab Pololikashvili, Secretary-General of the United Nations World Tourism Organization, stated that China’s visa exemption policy is a “significant move for the recovery of global tourism”. Peter Semone, Chair of the Pacific Asia Travel Association, praised China for “having great advantages in promoting inbound tourism”.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The introduction of the series of visa exemption policies further shows the Chinese government’s firm resolve in expanding high-level opening-up. These measures have brought forth positive effects internationally and provided a “China Approach” that other Member States can refer to. They have not only contributed to a remarkable surge in inbound visitor numbers and a strong recovery in the tourism economy but, more importantly, have reshaped the international community’s perception of China, making “China Travel” a top choice for global travelers as well. Moving forward, China is ready to actively share

its “China Experience” through ICAO and continue to work with all Member States to advance the global aviation network toward the goal of “seamless clearance and borderless experience”.

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