

China's Way

I recently have used this space to highlight issues that could threaten safety. This time I have the pleasure of highlighting an important example of how we can manage the challenges we are facing. While the rest of the world worries about how to maintain safety standards during a time of rapid growth, China is doing it a different way. China is holding safety as a constant, and letting the rate of growth be the variable.

Minister Yang Yuan Yuan, General Administration of Civil Aviation of China and last year's recipient of the Flight Safety Foundation–Boeing Aviation Safety Lifetime Achievement Award, is well aware of the challenges presented by his nation's economic success. As noted in a recent story that appeared on the Bloomberg newswire, China's passenger and cargo traffic grew 19.5 percent in the first half of 2007, faster than anticipated. "Our human resources and facilities can't support such fast growth," Yang told Bloomberg. "Our air traffic control and even the roads leading to airports are facing congestion."

At the end of 2006, China's airlines were flying 1,039 aircraft, double the size of the fleet in 1996 but only one-quarter of the 4,000 aircraft expected by 2020.

It is important to note that the regulatory system in China is very different. Minister Yang is not just a regulator of safety in the traditional sense. His authority extends to the economic regulation of the industry as well. But in this case, the point isn't about the extent of Yang's authority but rather what he is doing with that authority. He has made it clear that China's excellent safety record will be maintained or improved, and he is proactively limiting the rate of growth to make sure that happens.

While other countries passively observe the erosion of technical expertise in the system and worry about the impact, Yang has taken positive steps, such as raising pilot training standards

and toughening the criteria pilots must meet to gain promotion to captain. His actions speak to the pressures on the pilot population, pressures that elsewhere may be producing insufficiently experienced and skilled cockpit crews. Yang stressed the importance of skill and experience through the story of how the nose gear of a 767, being boarded in Beijing, collapsed due to a crew mistake; most of the staff involved in the incident were trainees.

About a decade ago, China was looking at its first experience with prolonged vigorous economic expansion and a booming aviation travel market. When several accidents highlighted the stresses on the system, Chinese regulators pulled in the reins, slowing growth and renewing their emphasis on safety. It is no coincidence that, following that action, China has not had an air carrier accident since 2004.

Vigorous economic and aviation system growth requires a coordinated ramp-up of infrastructure, including people, airports and air traffic control. This coordinated response doesn't manage itself. It must be controlled by an autonomous regulatory body that has the authority to act and the resources to follow through on those actions. That is what we are seeing in China. It has worked in the past, it will ensure safety in the future, and it reminds us what needs to be done to ensure safety in other places around the world. China's way may not be the answer in every detail for everybody, but I believe much can be learned from its experience.



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