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Guest Column:
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Attracting and Retaining STEM Talent is Key to Growth

Attracting and retaining the best STEM talent is both a national security and economic imperative. Congress has been considering providing an exemption for advanced STEM degree holders from current green card caps in order to help America maintain its competitive edge against China and to boost our economy during a global supply chain crisis.

Foreign-born scientists and engineers comprise more than 50 percent of the defense industrial base. Nearly two-thirds of U.S. graduate students in artificial intelligence (AI) and semiconductor-related programs were born abroad. The U.S. remains the most desirable destination for the world's best international scientists and engineers — a feat that China, despite extensive investments, hasn't come close to replicating.

Attracting and keeping this talent shouldn't be a partisan issue. In a recent letter to Congress, 49 national security experts—including several secretaries and deputy secretaries of defense, energy, and homeland security—who served under several Republican and Democratic administrations made the case for exempting advanced degree holders in STEM fields from annual green card limits: "This conference committee, as it reconciles differences between America COMPETES (H.R. 4521) and USICA (S. 1260), has a critical opportunity to tackle the self-inflicted drag that immigration bottlenecks impose on American competitiveness."

Under the current caps on high-skilled STEM degree holders, America risks falling behind. Today, top Indian STEM graduates are projected to face decades of wait time before being issued a green card. Such delays are driving talent away — more than half of AI PhDs who leave the country after graduating say they did so because of immigration issues.

China is racing ahead in growing its domestic STEM talent pipelines. It has doubled its higher education budget in less than a decade. Chinese universities are rapidly climbing in the global rankings. While the United States began this century with a comfortable lead, China now has double the annual U.S. STEM master's output and will hit double the number of U.S. STEM PhDs within the next three years — and its growth, in both quantity and quality, shows no signs of slowing down.

China is the most significant technological and geopolitical competitor our country faces. To ensure American leadership in research and development and our global competitiveness, we must attract and retain the best and brightest from around the world. Now is the time for Congress to act.

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