

February 8, 2022

Donde Plowman  
Office of the Chancellor  
The University of Tennessee Knoxville  
527 Andy Holt Tower  
Knoxville, TN 37966-0184

Dear Chancellor Plowman:

I write to urge you to terminate your existing academic and research partnerships with universities located in the People's Republic of China (PRC) that have been overtly tasked by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to support Beijing's military-industrial complex.

In a speech last year in Beijing, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping said that the PRC would "exhaust all means" to recruit intelligent and innovative professionals from around the world to support the technological development of the CCP's military, known as the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Such efforts, which include the PRC's Thousand Talents Program and its Double First-Class University Plan, are unambiguously geared towards advancing military-civil fusion (MCF), a national strategy of the CCP aimed at acquiring and developing the world's cutting-edge technology, including through theft, to achieve economic and military dominance.

In recent months, the PRC's increasingly aggressive tactics have also ensnared several notable U.S. academics and jeopardized the standing of their university patrons. This includes once-acclaimed Harvard University professor Charles Lieber, who in December 2021 was convicted in federal court on charges stemming from his illicit relationship with the PRC government. Lieber's case, and other similar convictions, raise important questions about how the United States assesses risk to its national security within its broader research enterprise. The PRC is fully integrating Chinese private industry and the PRC's civilian universities into their MCF strategy. To that end, nearly 70 Chinese civilian universities have been officially designated as part of the PRC's defense enterprise by the State Administration of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense (SASTIND), the civilian agency responsible for funding commercial and academic research in support of the PLA's requirements. That list of 70 PLA-linked civilian universities includes at least one of your current academic partners in the PRC.

For decades, Beijing has openly exploited the expertise of Chinese students and scholars studying or conducting research in the United States to accelerate the PRC's economic and military development. For example, according to one study conducted between 2007 and 2017, the PLA reportedly sent more than 2,500 of its own scientists abroad to study and work at foreign universities. Some of these scientists travelled abroad under civilian cover so as to

obfuscate their military affiliations. After completing their studies, these scientists returned to the PRC to support the country's military-industrial complex, including its nuclear weapons program and cyber-espionage platforms. Increasingly, Beijing has also come to rely on its civilian students and researchers to enable such nefarious work. This includes formal sponsorship of promising Chinese scholars in science, technology, engineering, and math to study at American and other foreign universities, after which time they are expected to return to the PRC to provide the technological know-how and talent needed to support its defense industry.

Information available in open sources indicates that the University of Tennessee, Knoxville currently maintains at least one partnership agreement with Southeast University with whom it previously jointly operated a Confucius Institute. Even though the University shuttered its Confucius Institute, it elected to maintain its partnership with Southeast University, which, according to public records, actively supports Beijing's military-industrial complex. More specifically, on its website, SEU cites its intent to develop high-tech talent for "government-funded schools, state-owned scientific research institutions, state key enterprises, government agencies, government-funded public institutions, and People's Liberation Army (PLA) units."<sup>7</sup> SEU is one of at least 10 Chinese institutions that receive funds from three or more of Beijing's national-level grant programs for information warfare-themed research. In 2016, SEU entered into a joint agreement between the Chinese Ministry of Education and SASTIND to work on "national defense discipline laboratories, military research tasks, and cooperation with military industry enterprises," among other classified projects.

SEU is also involved in Chinese cyber-espionage. SEU's Information Security Research Center hosts hacking contests, including the 2014 TOPSEC Cup. That contest was co-sponsored by Beijing Topsec Network Security Technology Co. Ltd., which received half of its start-up capital from the PLA. Topsec also trains, recruits, and works with PLA cybersecurity officers, according to 2009 U.S. Department of State cables. SEU has publicized that its defense research relies on its excellence in electronics, noting that the university maintains two defense laboratories that specialize in classified military research involving navigation technology and underwater acoustics. Both specialties are integral to Beijing's development of technology for underwater warfare. Of note, representatives from the PLA Navy's Submarine Academy visited SEU in 2017 to discuss continued collaboration on sensitive military projects.

I remain deeply concerned by the PLA's aggressive campaign to infiltrate America's research enterprise. I respectfully urge you to terminate the above outlined partnership agreement, and to take steps to thoroughly vet your other academic partners in the PRC for similar risks involving the misappropriation of academic research. Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Rubio', written in a cursive style.

Marco Rubio  
U.S. Senator