

Matter of DHANASAR, Petitioner*Decided December 27, 2016*

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
Administrative Appeals Office

USCIS may grant a national interest waiver if the petitioner demonstrates: (1) that the foreign national's proposed endeavor has both substantial merit and national importance; (2) that he or she is well positioned to advance the proposed endeavor; and (3) that, on balance, it would be beneficial to the United States to waive the job offer and labor certification requirements. *Matter of New York State Dep't of Transp.*, 22 I&N Dec. 215 (Acting Assoc. Comm'r 1998), vacated.

ON BEHALF OF PETITIONER: Gerard M. Chapman, Esquire, Greensboro, North Carolina

In this decision, we have occasion to revisit the analytical framework for assessing eligibility for “national interest waivers” under section 203(b)(2)(B)(i) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1153(b)(2)(B)(i) (2012). The self-petitioner, a researcher and educator in the field of aerospace engineering, filed an immigrant visa petition seeking classification under section 203(b)(2) of the Act as a member of the professions holding an advanced degree. The petitioner also sought a “national interest waiver” of the job offer otherwise required by section 203(b)(2)(A).

The Director of the Texas Service Center denied the petition under the existing analytical framework, concluding that the petitioner qualifies for classification as a member of the professions holding an advanced degree but that a waiver of the job offer requirement would not be in the national interest of the United States. Upon de novo review, and based on the revised national interest standard adopted herein, we will sustain the appeal and approve the petition.

I. LEGAL BACKGROUND

Subparagraph (A) of section 203(b)(2) of the Act makes immigrant visas available to “qualified immigrants who are members of the professions holding advanced degrees or their equivalent or who because of their exceptional ability in the sciences, arts, or business, will substantially benefit prospectively the national economy, cultural or educational

interests, or welfare of the United States.” Under subparagraph (A), immigrant visas are available to such individuals only if their “services in the sciences, arts, professions, or business are sought by an employer in the United States.”

Before hiring a foreign national under this immigrant classification, an employer must first obtain a permanent labor certification from the United States Department of Labor (“DOL”) under section 212(a)(5)(A)(i) of the Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1182(a)(5)(A)(i) (2012). *See also* 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(k)(4)(i) (2016). A labor certification demonstrates that DOL has determined that there are not sufficient workers who are able, willing, qualified, and available at the place where the alien is to perform such skilled or unskilled labor, and the employment of such alien will not adversely affect the wages and working conditions of workers in the United States similarly employed. In its labor certification application, the employer must list the position’s job requirements consistent with what is normally required for the occupation. *See* 20 C.F.R. § 656.17(h)(1) (2016). Moreover, the job requirements described on the labor certification application must represent the actual minimum requirements for the job opportunity. *See* 20 C.F.R. § 656.17(i)(1). That is, the employer may not tailor the position requirements to the foreign worker’s qualifications; it may only list the position’s minimum requirements, regardless of the foreign worker’s additional skills that go beyond what is normally required for the occupation. The employer must then test the labor market to determine if able, willing, or qualified U.S. workers are available with the advertised minimum qualifications. If such U.S. workers are found, the employer may not hire the foreign worker for the position, even if the foreign worker clearly has more skills (beyond the advertised qualifications). If the employer does not identify such U.S. workers and DOL determines that those workers are indeed unavailable, DOL will certify the labor certification. After securing the DOL-approved labor certification, the employer may then file a petition with DHS requesting the immigrant classification.

Under subparagraph (B) of section 203(b)(2), however, the Secretary of Homeland Security may waive the requirement of a “job offer” (namely, that the beneficiary’s services are sought by a U.S. employer) and, under the applicable regulations, of “a labor certification.” 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(k)(4)(ii).¹ That subparagraph states, in pertinent part, that the

¹ While appearing to limit national interest waivers to only aliens possessing exceptional ability in the sciences, arts, or business, 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(k)(4)(ii) was superseded in part by section 302(b)(2) of the Miscellaneous and Technical Immigration and Naturalization Amendments of 1991, Pub. L. No. 102-232, 105 Stat. 1733, 1743 (continued . . .)

Secretary “may, when the [Secretary] deems it to be in the national interest, waive the requirements of subparagraph (A) that an alien’s services in the sciences, arts, professions, or business be sought by an employer in the United States.”² Section 203(b)(2)(i) of the Act.

USCIS may grant a national interest waiver as a matter of discretion if the petitioner satisfies both subparagraphs (A) and (B). Thus, a petitioner who seeks a “national interest waiver” must first satisfy subparagraph (A) by demonstrating that the beneficiary qualifies as a member of the professions holding an advanced degree or as an individual of exceptional ability. *See* 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(k)(1)–(3) (providing definitions and considerations for making such determinations); *see also* section 203(b)(2)(C) of the Act (providing that possession of requisite academic degree or professional license “shall not by itself be considered sufficient evidence of exceptional ability”). The petitioner must then satisfy subparagraph (B) by establishing that it would be in the national interest to waive the “job offer” requirement under subparagraph (A).³ *See* 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(k)(4)(ii). This two-part statutory scheme is relatively straightforward, but the term “national interest” is ambiguous. Undefined by statute and regulation, “national interest” is a broad concept subject to various interpretations.

In 1998, under the legacy Immigration and Naturalization Service, we issued a precedent decision establishing a framework for evaluating national interest waiver petitions. *Matter of New York State Dep’t of Transp.* (“*NYSDOT*”), 22 I&N Dec. 215 (Acting Assoc. Comm’r 1998).

(“MTINA”). Section 302(b)(2) of MTINA amended section 203(b)(2)(B)(i) of the Act by inserting the word “professions” after the word “arts,” and thereby made the national interest waiver available to members of the professions holding advanced degrees in addition to individuals of exceptional ability.

² Pursuant to section 1517 of the Homeland Security Act (“HSA”) of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-296, 116 Stat. 2135, 2311 (codified at 6 U.S.C. § 557 (2012)), any reference to the Attorney General in a provision of the Act describing functions that were transferred from the Attorney General or other Department of Justice official to the Department of Homeland Security by the HSA “shall be deemed to refer to the Secretary” of Homeland Security. *See also* 6 U.S.C. § 542 note (2012); 8 U.S.C. § 1551 note (2012).

³ To do so, a petitioner must go beyond showing the individual’s expertise in a particular field. The regulation at 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(k)(2) defines “exceptional ability” as “a degree of expertise significantly above that ordinarily encountered” in a given area of endeavor. By statute, individuals of exceptional ability are generally subject to the job offer/labor certification requirement; they are not exempt by virtue of their exceptional ability. Therefore, whether a given petitioner seeks classification as an individual of exceptional ability, or as a member of the professions holding an advanced degree, that individual cannot qualify for a waiver just by demonstrating a degree of expertise significantly above that ordinarily encountered in his field of expertise.

The *NYS DOT* framework looks first to see if a petitioner has shown that the area of employment is of “substantial intrinsic merit.” *Id.* at 217. Next, a petitioner must establish that any proposed benefit from the individual’s endeavors will be “national in scope.” *Id.* Finally, the petitioner must demonstrate that the national interest would be adversely affected if a labor certification were required for the foreign national. *Id.*

Based on our experience with that decision in the intervening period, we believe it is now time for a reassessment. While the first prong has held up under adjudicative experience, the term “intrinsic” adds little to the analysis yet is susceptible to unnecessary subjective evaluation.⁴ Similarly, the second prong has caused relatively few problems in adjudications, but occasionally the term “national in scope” is construed too narrowly by focusing primarily on the geographic impact of the benefit. While *NYS DOT* found a civil engineer’s employment to be national in scope even though it was limited to a particular region, that finding hinged on the geographic connections between New York’s bridges and roads and the national transportation system. Certain locally or regionally focused endeavors, however, may be of national importance despite being difficult to quantify with respect to geographic scope.

What has generated the greatest confusion for petitioners and adjudicators, however, is *NYS DOT*’s third prong. First, this prong is explained in several different ways within *NYS DOT* itself, leaving the reader uncertain what ultimately is the relevant inquiry. We initially state the third prong as requiring a petitioner to “demonstrate that the national interest would be adversely affected if a labor certification were required.” *NYS DOT*, 22 I&N Dec. at 217. We then alternatively describe the third prong as requiring the petitioner to demonstrate that the individual “present[s] a national benefit so great as to outweigh the national interest inherent in the labor certification process.” *Id.* at 218. Immediately thereafter, we restate the third prong yet again: the petitioner must establish that the individual will “serve the national interest to a substantially greater degree than would an available U.S. worker having the same minimum qualifications.”⁵ *Id.* Finally, in what may be construed as either a fourth restatement of prong three or as an explanation of how to satisfy it, we state that “it clearly must be established that the alien’s past record justifies projections of future benefit to the national interest.” *Id.* at 219. A footnote

⁴ *Cf.*, e.g., *24/7 Records, Inc. v. Sony Music Entm’t, Inc.*, 514 F. Supp. 2d 571, 575 (S.D.N.Y. 2007) (“‘Intrinsic value’ is an inherently subjective and speculative concept.”).

⁵ Other, slight variations of the third prong emerge later in the decision. *See NYS DOT*, 22 I&N at 220 (“to a greater extent than U.S. workers”); *see also id.* at 221 (“considerably outweigh”).

to this statement clarifies that USCIS seeks “a past history of demonstrable achievement with some degree of influence on the field as a whole.” *Id.* at 219 n.6. Although residing in footnote 6, this “influence” standard has in practice become the primary yardstick against which petitions are measured.⁶

Second, and a more fundamental challenge than parsing its several restatements, *NYSDOT*’s third prong can be misinterpreted to require the petitioner to submit, and the adjudicator to evaluate, evidence relevant to the very labor market test that the waiver is intended to forego. The first iteration of prong three, that the national interest would be adversely affected if a labor certification were required, implies that petitioners should submit evidence of harm to the national interest. The third iteration, that the individual will serve the national interest to a substantially greater degree than would an available U.S. worker having the same minimum qualifications, suggests that petitioners should submit evidence comparing foreign nationals to unidentified U.S. workers. These concepts have proven to be difficult for many qualified individuals to establish or analyze in the abstract. It has proven particularly ill-suited for USCIS to evaluate petitions from self-employed individuals, such as entrepreneurs. In *NYSDOT*, we even “acknowledge[d] that there are certain occupations wherein individuals are essentially self-employed, and thus would have no U.S. employer to apply for a labor certification.” *Id.* at 218 n.5. Nonetheless, we did not modify the test to resolve this scenario, which continues to challenge petitioners and USCIS adjudicators. Lastly, this concept of harm-to-national-interest is not required by, and unnecessarily narrows, the Secretary’s broad discretionary authority to grant a waiver when he “deems it to be in the national interest.”

II. NEW ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Accordingly, our decision in *NYSDOT* is ripe for revision. Today, we vacate *NYSDOT* and adopt a new framework for adjudicating national interest waiver petitions, one that will provide greater clarity, apply more flexibly to circumstances of both petitioning employers and self-petitioning

⁶ While this “influence” standard rests upon the reasonable notion that past success will often predict future benefit, our adjudication experience in the years since *NYSDOT* has revealed that there are some talented individuals for whom past achievements are not necessarily the best or only predictor of future success.

individuals, and better advance the purpose of the broad discretionary waiver provision to benefit the United States.⁷

Under the new framework, and after eligibility for EB-2 classification has been established, USCIS may grant a national interest waiver if the petitioner demonstrates by a preponderance of the evidence:⁸ (1) that the foreign national's proposed endeavor has both substantial merit and national importance; (2) that the foreign national is well positioned to advance the proposed endeavor; and (3) that, on balance, it would be beneficial to the United States to waive the requirements of a job offer and thus of a labor certification. If these three elements are satisfied, USCIS may approve the national interest waiver as a matter of discretion.⁹

The first prong, substantial merit and national importance, focuses on the specific endeavor that the foreign national proposes to undertake. The endeavor's merit may be demonstrated in a range of areas such as business, entrepreneurialism, science, technology, culture, health, or education. Evidence that the endeavor has the potential to create a significant economic impact may be favorable but is not required, as an endeavor's merit may be established without immediate or quantifiable economic impact. For example, endeavors related to research, pure science, and the furtherance of human knowledge may qualify, whether or not the potential accomplishments in those fields are likely to translate into economic benefits for the United States.

In determining whether the proposed endeavor has national importance, we consider its potential prospective impact. An undertaking may have national importance for example, because it has national or even global implications within a particular field, such as those resulting from certain improved manufacturing processes or medical advances. But we do not evaluate prospective impact solely in geographic terms. Instead, we look for broader implications. Even ventures and undertakings that have as their focus one geographic area of the United States may properly be considered to have national importance. In modifying this prong to assess "national

⁷ Going forward, we will use "petitioners" to include both employers who have filed petitions on behalf of employees and individuals who have filed petitions on their own behalf (namely, self-petitioners).

⁸ Under the "preponderance of the evidence" standard, a petitioner must establish that he or she more likely than not satisfies the qualifying elements. *Matter of Chawathe*, 25 I&N Dec. 369, 376 (AAO 2010). We will consider not only the quantity, but also the quality (including relevance, probative value, and credibility) of the evidence. *Id.*

⁹ Because the national interest waiver is "purely discretionary," *Schneider v. Chertoff*, 450 F.3d 944, 948 (9th Cir. 2006), the petitioner also must show that the foreign national otherwise merits a favorable exercise of discretion. *See Zhu v. Gonzales*, 411 F.3d 292, 295 (D.C. Cir. 2005); *cf. Matter of Jean*, 23 I&N Dec. 373, 383 (A.G. 2002).

importance” rather than “national in scope,” as used in *NYSDOT*, we seek to avoid overemphasis on the geographic breadth of the endeavor. An endeavor that has significant potential to employ U.S. workers or has other substantial positive economic effects, particularly in an economically depressed area, for instance, may well be understood to have national importance.

The second prong shifts the focus from the proposed endeavor to the foreign national. To determine whether he or she is well positioned to advance the proposed endeavor, we consider factors including, but not limited to: the individual’s education, skills, knowledge and record of success in related or similar efforts; a model or plan for future activities; any progress towards achieving the proposed endeavor; and the interest of potential customers, users, investors, or other relevant entities or individuals.

We recognize that forecasting feasibility or future success may present challenges to petitioners and USCIS officers, and that many innovations and entrepreneurial endeavors may ultimately fail, in whole or in part, despite an intelligent plan and competent execution. We do not, therefore, require petitioners to demonstrate that their endeavors are more likely than not to ultimately succeed. But notwithstanding this inherent uncertainty, in order to merit a national interest waiver, petitioners must establish, by a preponderance of the evidence, that they are well positioned to advance the proposed endeavor.

The third prong requires the petitioner to demonstrate that, on balance, it would be beneficial to the United States to waive the requirements of a job offer and thus of a labor certification. On the one hand, Congress clearly sought to further the national interest by requiring job offers and labor certifications to protect the domestic labor supply. On the other hand, by creating the national interest waiver, Congress recognized that in certain cases the benefits inherent in the labor certification process can be outweighed by other factors that are also deemed to be in the national interest. Congress entrusted the Secretary to balance these interests within the context of individual national interest waiver adjudications.

In performing this analysis, USCIS may evaluate factors such as: whether, in light of the nature of the foreign national’s qualifications or proposed endeavor, it would be impractical either for the foreign national to secure a job offer or for the petitioner to obtain a labor certification;¹⁰

¹⁰ For example, the labor certification process may prevent a petitioning employer from hiring a foreign national with unique knowledge or skills that are not easily articulated in a labor certification. *See generally* 20 C.F.R. § 656.17(i). Likewise, because of the nature of the proposed endeavor, it may be impractical for an entrepreneur or
(continued . . .)

whether, even assuming that other qualified U.S. workers are available, the United States would still benefit from the foreign national's contributions; and whether the national interest in the foreign national's contributions is sufficiently urgent to warrant forgoing the labor certification process. We emphasize that, in each case, the factor(s) considered must, taken together, indicate that on balance, it would be beneficial to the United States to waive the requirements of a job offer and thus of a labor certification.

We note that this new prong, unlike the third prong of *NYS DOT*, does not require a showing of harm to the national interest or a comparison against U.S. workers in the petitioner's field. As stated previously, *NYS DOT*'s third prong was especially problematic for certain petitioners, such as entrepreneurs and self-employed individuals. This more flexible test, which can be met in a range of ways as described above, is meant to apply to a greater variety of individuals.

III. ANALYSIS

The director found the petitioner to be qualified for the classification sought by virtue of his advanced degrees. We agree that he holds advanced degrees and therefore qualifies under section 203(b)(2)(A). The remaining issue before us is whether the petitioner has established, by a preponderance of the evidence, that he is eligible for and merits a national interest waiver.

The petitioner proposes to engage in research and development relating to air and space propulsion systems, as well as to teach aerospace engineering, at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University ("North Carolina A&T"). The petitioner holds two master of science degrees, in mechanical engineering and in applied physics, as well as a Ph.D. in engineering, from North Carolina A&T. At the time of filing the instant petition, he also worked as a postdoctoral research associate at the university. The record reflects that the petitioner's graduate and postgraduate research has focused on hypersonic propulsion systems (systems involving propulsion at speeds of Mach 5 and above) and on computational fluid dynamics. He has developed a validated computational model of a high-speed air-breathing propulsion engine, as well as a novel numerical method for accurately calculating hypersonic air flow. The petitioner intends to continue his research at the university.

The extensive record includes: reliable evidence of the petitioner's credentials; copies of his publications and other published materials that

self-employed inventor, when advancing an endeavor on his or her own, to secure a job offer from a U.S. employer.

cite his work; evidence of his membership in professional associations; and documentation regarding his research and teaching activities. The petitioner also submitted several letters from individuals who establish their own expertise in aerospace, describe the petitioner's research in detail and attest to his expertise in the field of hypersonic propulsion systems.

We determine that the petitioner is eligible for a national interest waiver under the new framework. First, we conclude that the petitioner has established both the substantial merit and national importance of his proposed endeavor. The petitioner demonstrated that he intends to continue research into the design and development of propulsion systems for potential use in military and civilian technologies such as nano-satellites, rocket-propelled ballistic missiles, and single-stage-to-orbit vehicles. In letters supporting the petition, he describes how research in this area enhances our national security and defense by allowing the United States to maintain its advantage over other nations in the field of hypersonic flight. We find that this proposed research has substantial merit because it aims to advance scientific knowledge and further national security interests and U.S. competitiveness in the civil space sector.

The record further demonstrates that the petitioner's proposed endeavor is of national importance. The petitioner submitted probative expert letters from individuals holding senior positions in academia, government, and industry that describe the importance of hypersonic propulsion research as it relates to U.S. strategic interests. He also provided media articles and other evidence documenting the interest of the House Committee on Armed Services in the development of hypersonic technologies and discussing the potential significance of U.S. advances in this area of research and development. The letters and the media articles discuss efforts and advances that other countries are currently making in the area of hypersonic propulsion systems and the strategic importance of U.S. advancement in researching and developing these technologies for use in missiles, satellites, and aircraft.

Second, we find that the record establishes that the petitioner is well positioned to advance the proposed endeavor. Beyond his multiple graduate degrees in relevant fields, the petitioner has experience conducting research and developing computational models that support the mission of the United States Department of Defense ("DOD") to develop air superiority and protection capabilities of U.S. military forces, and that assist in the development of platforms for Earth observation and interplanetary exploration. The petitioner submitted detailed expert letters describing U.S. Government interest and investment in his research, and the record includes documentation that the petitioner played a significant role in projects funded by grants from the National Aeronautics and Space

Administration (“NASA”) and the Air Force Research Laboratories (“AFRL”) within DOD.¹¹ Thus, the significance of the petitioner’s research in his field is corroborated by evidence of peer and government interest in his research, as well as by consistent government funding of the petitioner’s research projects. The petitioner’s education, experience, and expertise in his field, the significance of his role in research projects, as well as the sustained interest of and funding from government entities such as NASA and AFRL, position him well to continue to advance his proposed endeavor of hypersonic technology research.

Third and finally, we conclude that, on balance, it would be beneficial to the United States to waive the requirements of a job offer and thus of a labor certification. As noted above, the petitioner holds three graduate degrees in fields tied to the proposed endeavor, and the record demonstrates that he possesses considerable experience and expertise in a highly specialized field. The evidence also shows that research on hypersonic propulsion holds significant implications for U.S. national security and competitiveness. In addition, the repeated funding of research in which the petitioner played a key role indicates that government agencies, including NASA and the DOD, have found his work on this topic to be promising and useful. Because of his record of successful research in an area that furthers U.S. interests, we find that this petitioner offers contributions of such value that, on balance, they would benefit the United States even assuming that other qualified U.S. workers are available.

In addition to conducting research, the petitioner proposes to support teaching activities in science, technology, engineering, and math (“STEM”) disciplines. He submits letters favorably attesting to his teaching abilities at the university level and evidence of his participation in mentorship programs for middle school students. While STEM teaching has substantial merit in relation to U.S. educational interests, the record does not indicate by a preponderance of the evidence that the petitioner would be engaged in activities that would impact the field of STEM education more broadly. Accordingly, as the petitioner has not established by a preponderance of the evidence that his proposed teaching activities meet the “national importance” element of the first prong of the new framework, we do not address the remaining prongs in relation to the petitioner’s teaching activities.

¹¹ Although the director of North Carolina A&T’s Center for Aerospace Research (“CAR”) is listed as the lead principal investigator on all grants for CAR research, the record establishes that the petitioner initiated or is the primary award contact on several funded grant proposals and that he is the only listed researcher on many of the grants.

IV. CONCLUSION

The record demonstrates by a preponderance of the evidence that: (1) the petitioner's research in aerospace engineering has both substantial merit and national importance; (2) the petitioner is well positioned to advance his research; and (3) on balance, it is beneficial to the United States to waive the requirements of a job offer and thus of a labor certification. We find that the petitioner has established eligibility for and otherwise merits a national interest waiver as a matter of discretion.

In visa petition proceedings, it is the petitioner's burden to establish eligibility for the immigration benefit sought. Section 291 of the Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1361 (2012). The petitioner has met that burden.

ORDER: The appeal is sustained and the petition is approved.