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Report to Congressional Committees

November 2026

SMALL BUSINESS RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Selected Agencies Address Foreign Risks and Take Various Approaches to Track Data



GAO-27-108923

GAO Highlights

SMALL BUSINESS RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Selected Agencies Address Foreign Risks and Take Various Approaches to Track Data

GAO-27-108923 November 2026

A report to congressional committees

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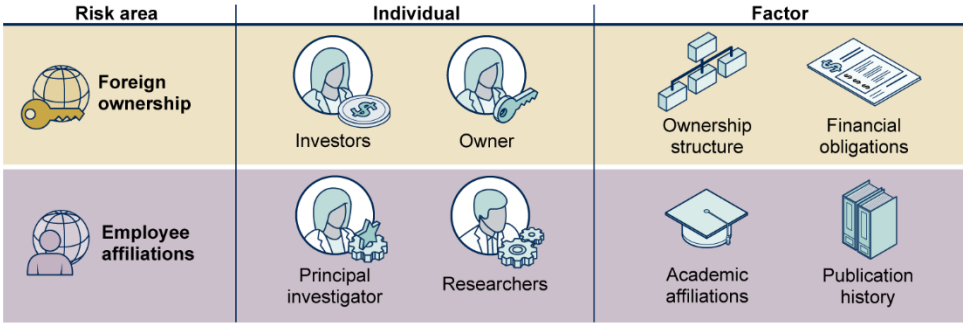
What GAO Found

The SBIR and STTR Extension Act of 2022 (Extension Act) requires participating agencies to assess security risks posed by small businesses applying for funding through the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) programs. GAO found that the five agencies it examined do so by considering a range of individuals and factors (see figure). For example, to identify risks associated with foreign ownership, agencies may review business investors' and owners' foreign connections and debts.

Individuals and Factors Selected Agencies May Consider to Identify and Assess Foreign Risks

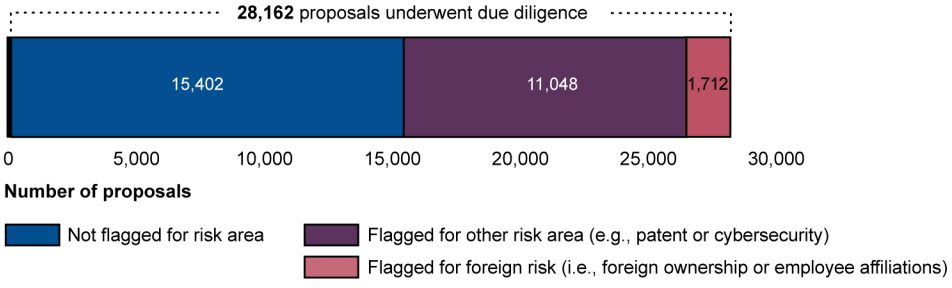


Source: GAO analysis of agency documents; GAO (illustrations). | GAO-27-108923

In general, selected agencies identify foreign risks using a standardized disclosure form about an applicant's foreign affiliations and financial support. Agencies then verify disclosures using analytical tools or counterintelligence reviews. After assessing an applicant's risk level, agencies decide whether to award, mitigate risk by adding certain conditions, or deny the award.

GAO also found that the five selected agencies use various approaches to maintain and track data on their due diligence activities, such as automated systems and spreadsheets. In fiscal years (FY) 2024 and 2025, agencies performed due diligence on over 28,000 SBIR and STTR proposals and identified over 1,700 possible foreign risks (see figure). They also identified over 11,000 other risks, such as risks related to patents or cybersecurity. Examples of foreign risks include a researcher who is currently a professor in China, and a company that did not disclose that it maintained a foreign business entity.

Agency-Reported Foreign Risks, Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025



Source: GAO analysis of agency SBIR and STTR data. | GAO-27-108923

Why GAO Did This Study

The SBIR and STTR programs fund research and development by U.S. small businesses. In FY2024, federal agencies issued more than 6,400 such awards in areas such as defense, energy, and health care. However, U.S. intelligence agencies have expressed concerns about foreign adversaries seeking to obtain proprietary data from small businesses via these programs, potentially threatening national security.

The Extension Act requires participating agencies to implement due diligence programs to assess the security risks posed by small business applicants. It includes a provision for GAO to issue a series of reports on these due diligence efforts. This report, the fourth in the series, examines (1) how five selected agencies and components—the Air Force, the Department of Energy, the National Institutes of Health, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the National Science Foundation—address foreign risks and (2) the extent to which selected agencies collect and track data on these efforts.

To address these objectives, GAO selected the five agencies that issue the most awards annually based on FY2024 data. GAO reviewed agencies' documents on due diligence policies and procedures for identifying, assessing, and mitigating foreign ownership and employee affiliations risks. GAO interviewed program officials from the Small Business Administration, and participating agencies' SBIR and STTR program offices, research security offices, and counterintelligence offices. To determine the extent to which agencies collect or track data on efforts to manage foreign risks, GAO obtained and analyzed the agencies' documents and data from FY2024 and FY2025 on both risk areas.

Contents

Letter 1

Background 4
Selected Agencies Consider a Range of Information Sources to Mitigate Foreign Risks 6
Agencies Use Various Approaches to Track Foreign Risk Data 15
Agency Comments 21

Appendix I Objectives, Scope, and Methodology 24

Appendix II GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments 28

Tables

Table 1: Topics on the Small Business Administration's Foreign Disclosure Form 9
Table 2: Foreign Disclosures in the Biographical Sketch and Current and Pending Support Form 10
Table 3: Examples of Potential Mitigation Approaches Cited by Five Selected Agencies 14
Table 4: Five Agencies' Reported Foreign Risks Flagged for SBIR and STTR Proposals, Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025 17
Table 5: Illustrative Examples of Foreign Risks Identified by Five Selected Agencies, Fiscal Year 2025 19

Figures

Figure 1: Examples of Individuals and Factors Agencies Consider to Identify Foreign Risks of Applicants in Small Business Research Programs 7
Figure 2: Generalized Process for the SBIR and STTR Foreign Risk Due Diligence Program 8
Figure 3: Foreign Risks Identified and Results for Five Selected Agencies, Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025 16
Figure 4: Five Agencies' Reported Results of Foreign Risks Flagged for SBIR and STTR Proposals, Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025 18

Abbreviations

Air Force	Department of the Air Force
DOD	Department of Defense
DOE	Department of Energy
Extension Act	SBIR and STTR Extension Act of 2022
FCOC	foreign country of concern
FY	fiscal year
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NIH	National Institutes of Health
NSF	National Science Foundation
OCEA	Air Force Office of Commercial and Economic Analysis
R&D	research and development
SBA	Small Business Administration
SBIR	Small Business Innovation Research
STTR	Small Business Technology Transfer

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U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE
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November 19, 2026

Congressional Committees

The Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) programs provide research and development (R&D) funding to small businesses for the creation of new technologies. The programs seek to advance U.S. scientific excellence and innovation through investment in emerging technology companies in areas such as defense, energy, and health care. The 11 federal agencies that participate in these programs provide support through awards (contracts, grants, or cooperative agreements). The Small Business Administration (SBA) is responsible for overseeing the programs, and according to data from SBA, in fiscal year (FY) 2024, these 11 agencies issued more than 6,400 awards combined, valued at approximately $4.3 billion.

U.S. intelligence agencies have raised concerns that these emerging technology companies could be targeted by foreign actors seeking to obtain proprietary data, advance their nations' economic and military capabilities, and threaten national security. In 2024, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence's Counterintelligence Strategy stated that foreign adversaries' efforts to obtain U.S. emerging technologies represent a significant threat to our economic security.[1] The National Counterintelligence and Security Center has published several reports citing foreign threats to U.S. small businesses and researchers. Attempts to transfer U.S. technologies abroad have included international pitch competitions boasting cash awards, funding opportunities in exchange for research collaboration, and foreign investments in start-up companies.[2]

The SBIR and STTR Extension Act of 2022 (Extension Act) requires participating agencies to implement due diligence programs with the purpose of assessing security risks posed by small business applicants.

[1]Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *National Counterintelligence Strategy,* (Washington, D.C.: August 1, 2024).

[2]National Counterintelligence and Security Center, *Safeguarding Western Tech Startups: Exploitation of International Pitch Competitions*, (Washington, D.C.: September 2025); *Safeguarding Academia: Protecting Fundamental Research, Intellectual Property, Critical Technologies, and the U.S. Research Ecosystem*, (Washington, D.C.: August 2025); *Safeguarding Our Innovation: Protecting U.S. Emerging Technology Companies From Investment by Foreign Threat Actor*, (Washington, D.C.: July 2024).

Prior to providing a SBIR or STTR award, agencies are required to use a risk-based approach, as appropriate, to assess applicants in these four areas: foreign ownership, employee affiliations, patents, and cybersecurity practices.[3]

In November 2024, we reported that agencies had identified and begun to mitigate potential foreign risks.[4] In January 2026, we reported that all participating agencies incorporated some of SBA's 12 best practices for due diligence.[5] These practices include collecting information using a standardized form, using multiple sources of information to identify risks, and prioritizing due diligence for meritorious proposals. We made 26 recommendations to 11 agencies, including that agencies communicate with applicants and awardees, update their due diligence plans, and develop a method to track their due diligence activities, among other actions. All 11 agencies concurred with our recommendations, and ten agencies are working to implement their respective recommendations.

The Extension Act includes a provision for GAO to issue multiple reports on the participating agencies' implementation of their due diligence programs.[6] This report, the fourth in the series, examines (1) how selected agencies identify, assess, and mitigate foreign ownership and employee affiliations risks and (2) the extent to which agencies collect and track data on these efforts.

The scope of our work includes SBA and five selected participating agencies: the Department of Defense (DOD), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Department of Energy (DOE), National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and the National Science

[3]Pub. L. No. 117-183, § 4,136 Stat. 2180, 2181-86 (codified, as amended, at 15 U.S.C. § 638(vv)). These four areas were expanded in 2026 by the Small Business Innovation and Economic Security Act, Pub. L. No. 119-83, 140 Stat. 755 (2026), which reauthorized the SBIR and STTR programs following an expiration of program authority that occurred between October 1, 2025, and April 13, 2026. This program authority expiration and the Small Business Innovation and Economic Security Act are outside of the scope of this review, but we plan to address them in future reports.

[4]GAO, *Small Business Research Programs: Agencies Identified Foreign Risks, but Some Due Diligence Programs Lack Clear Procedures*, GAO-25-107402 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 21, 2024).

[5]GAO, *Small Business Research Programs: Additional Actions Needed to Incorporate Best Practices for Addressing Foreign Risk*, GAO-26-107972 (Washington, D.C.: January 28, 2026).

[6]Pub. L. No. 117-183, § 4(b)(4),136 Stat. 2180, 2183 (amended 2026).

Foundation (NSF). We selected these five agencies because they issue the highest number of awards annually. They also accounted for nearly 95 percent of SBIR and STTR awards in FY2024. For the three agencies with more than one component that issues awards (DOD, DOE, and HHS), we selected the component that issues the highest number of awards annually based on FY2024 award data, which were the most complete available at the time of our review.[7] Specifically, we focused on the Department of the Air Force in DOD, the Office of Science in DOE, and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in HHS. We also reviewed agencies' due diligence processes and risks identified in FY2024 and FY2025, as these were the first two full award cycles during which agencies were required to implement due diligence programs.

To address our objectives, we obtained and reviewed agencies' documents on their due diligence policies and procedures for identifying, assessing, and mitigating foreign ownership and employee affiliations risks. We interviewed program officials from SBA and selected agencies' SBIR and STTR program offices and research security offices, as appropriate. We also interviewed officials at the four selected agencies that have counterintelligence offices. To determine the extent to which agencies collect or track data on efforts to identify, assess, and mitigate foreign risks, we obtained and analyzed the agencies' data on foreign ownership and employee affiliations risks. These data cover proposals for which agencies performed due diligence in FY2024 and FY2025.[8] We assessed the reliability of these data—for example, by checking for missing data and outliers—and determined the data to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report. To better understand how the five agencies identified, assessed, and mitigated foreign risks, we also collected and reviewed a small sample of proposal packages and related due diligence documentation from each agency. We selected six to seven proposals per agency from FY2025 that included a mix of award phases, outcomes, and risk areas identified. For more information on the objectives, scope, and methodology, see appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from February 2026 to November 2026 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to

[7]In this report, for DOD and HHS, we refer to the component—Air Force and NIH, respectively—we reviewed rather than the department.

[8]Because solicitation and award cycles span fiscal years, some agencies performed due diligence in a different fiscal year than the fiscal year in which the solicitation was posted.

obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Overview of SBIR and STTR Programs

All federal agencies with an R&D budget greater than $100 million are required to participate in the SBIR program, and agencies with R&D obligations of more than $1 billion are required to participate in the STTR program.[9] According to the SBA SBIR and STTR Policy Directive, participating SBIR and STTR agencies must issue a solicitation requesting proposals at least once a year. These solicitations cover a variety of technological R&D topics, such as defense, energy, and health care. Eleven federal agencies and their components participate in the SBIR and STTR programs.[10]

Extension Act Requirements for Agencies' Due Diligence Programs

The Extension Act requires each federal agency with a SBIR or STTR program to implement a due diligence program with a deadline of June 2023. The act expands on existing guidelines to protect U.S.-supported R&D against foreign government interference and exploitation by requiring all SBIR and STTR participating agencies to:[11]

- use a risk-based approach, as appropriate, to assess security risks in four areas: cybersecurity practices, patents, employee affiliations, and foreign ownership;[12]

[9]15 U.S.C. § 638(f)(1), (n)(1)(A). Agencies' R&D programs generally include funding for two types of R&D: intramural and extramural. Intramural R&D is conducted by employees of a federal agency in or through government-owned, government-operated facilities. Extramural R&D is generally conducted by nonfederal employees outside of federal facilities. Federal agency, as defined under the statute, does not include agencies within the intelligence community. 15 U.S.C. § 638(e)(2).

[10]The eleven federal agencies that participate in the SBIR or STTR programs are the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, and Transportation; the Environmental Protection Agency; the National Aeronautics and Space Administration; and the National Science Foundation.

[11]National Security Presidential Memorandum 33 (NSPM-33). This guidance was released in January 2021 with the purpose of strengthening protections of federally funded R&D against foreign government interference and exploitation. National Science and Technology Council, Guidance for Implementing NSPM-33.

[12]The Extension Act does not explicitly define these risk areas but does define certain terms related to foreign risk management.

- use a risk-based approach, as appropriate, to assess proposals or applications using open-source analysis and analytical tools for certain nondisclosures of foreign affiliations and relationships.

This report focuses on two Extension Act risk areas—foreign ownership and employee affiliations. We have previously described these areas as including the following aspects:[13]

- **Foreign ownership.** Consistent with federal regulations and to be eligible for SBIR and STTR awards, small business applicants must meet specific eligibility requirements.[14] For example, SBIR and STTR applicants must generally be at least 50 percent directly owned and controlled by U.S. citizens or permanent residents. Due diligence programs must assess a small business's financial ties and obligations to a foreign country, entity, or person.
- **Employee affiliations.** Employees who perform R&D using a SBIR or STTR award may be subject to exploitation attempts to obtain sensitive research information. Agencies must assess potential risks of employee affiliations, such as academic or professional history.[15] Agencies may focus particularly on those employees who can significantly influence the direction of the research, the acquisition of data, or the method and analysis of the research.

The Extension Act also requires that applicants disclose certain foreign affiliations and relationships. In May 2023, SBA issued a standardized disclosure form for participating agencies, available as an appendix in the SBIR and STTR Policy Directive. In the context of this report, "foreign disclosure" means the acknowledgement or explanation of foreign connections, such as financial, professional, or academic connections by

[13]GAO-25-107402, GAO-26-107972.

[14]SBIR and STTR Size and Eligibility Requirements for SBIR and STTR Programs, 13 C.F.R. §§ 121.701-05 (2024).

[15]The Extension Act refers to this risk area as "employee analysis." As with prior GAO reports on this issue, we refer to this risk area as "employee affiliations" for the purposes of this review. Agencies may refer to this risk area internally using other terms, such as employee connections. An employee "foreign affiliation" is defined by 15 U.S.C. §638(e)(16) as "a funded or unfunded academic, professional, or institutional appointment or position with a foreign government or government-owned entity."

an applicant to a federal agency during the SBIR and STTR application process.[16]

Selected Agencies Consider a Range of Information Sources to Mitigate Foreign Risks

Based on our review of documents and interviews with officials from five selected agencies, the due diligence process to mitigate foreign risks generally involves collecting information about a range of actors using multiple sources, including counterintelligence. First, to identify risks, all five agencies collect standardized disclosures from applicants. Second, these agencies verify disclosed information and use established processes to search for relevant nondisclosed information. Third, they assess and mitigate any identified risks.

Agencies Consider Company Ownership, Key Individuals, and Affiliations to Manage Foreign Risks

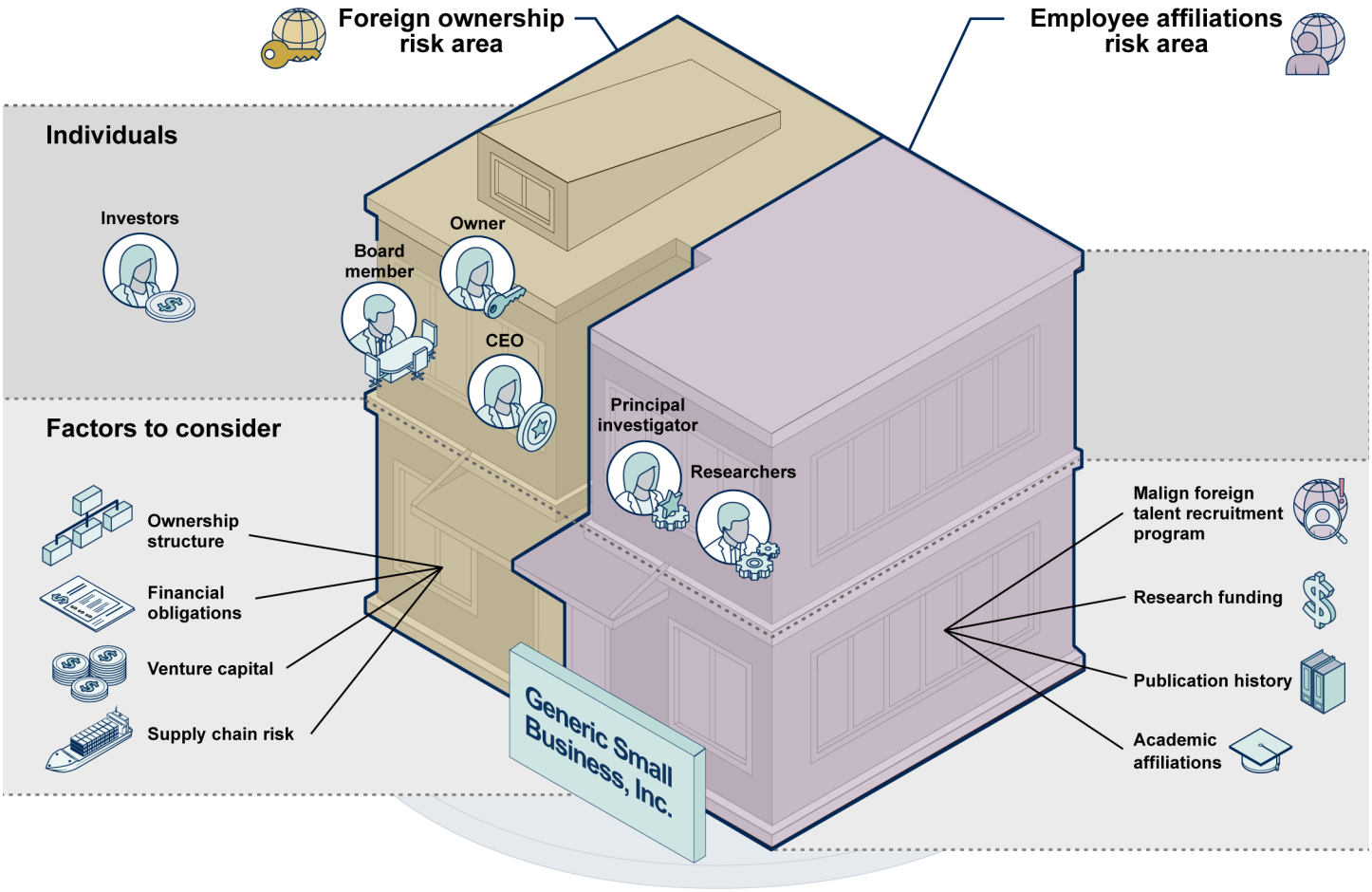
We found that the five agencies we reviewed identify foreign risks by collecting information on a range of individuals. Specifically, they identify:

- **foreign ownership** risks using information about, for example, a company's financial history, investors, debts, and officers (e.g., CEO or founder) to understand the ownership structure and financial obligations; and
- **employee affiliation** risks by examining information such as professional and academic history of the principal investigator and covered individuals within a company, publication and patent history, and current or pending research funding (see fig. 1).[17]

[16]We have previously reported on foreign disclosure in other contexts, such as the Foreign Military Sales program, which encompass the consideration of both technology release (i.e., the release of defense articles with sensitive technology) and foreign disclosure (i.e., the disclosure of sensitive information, such as briefings that include classified information). For more information on this other definition, see GAO, *Technology Release and Foreign Disclosure: DOD Is Taking Action to Help Improve Its Processes*, GAO-26-108435 (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2026).

[17]Applicants must disclose certain information to the agency regarding covered individuals, which can include consultants, graduate students, and postdoctoral associates, or key personnel such as direct employees and subcontractors. In general, the term "covered individual" means an individual who (1) contributes in a substantive, meaningful way to the scientific development or execution of an R&D project proposed to be carried out with an R&D award from a federal research agency; and (2) is designated as a covered individual by the federal research agency concerned.

Figure 1: Examples of Individuals and Factors Agencies Consider to Identify Foreign Risks of Applicants in Small Business Research Programs

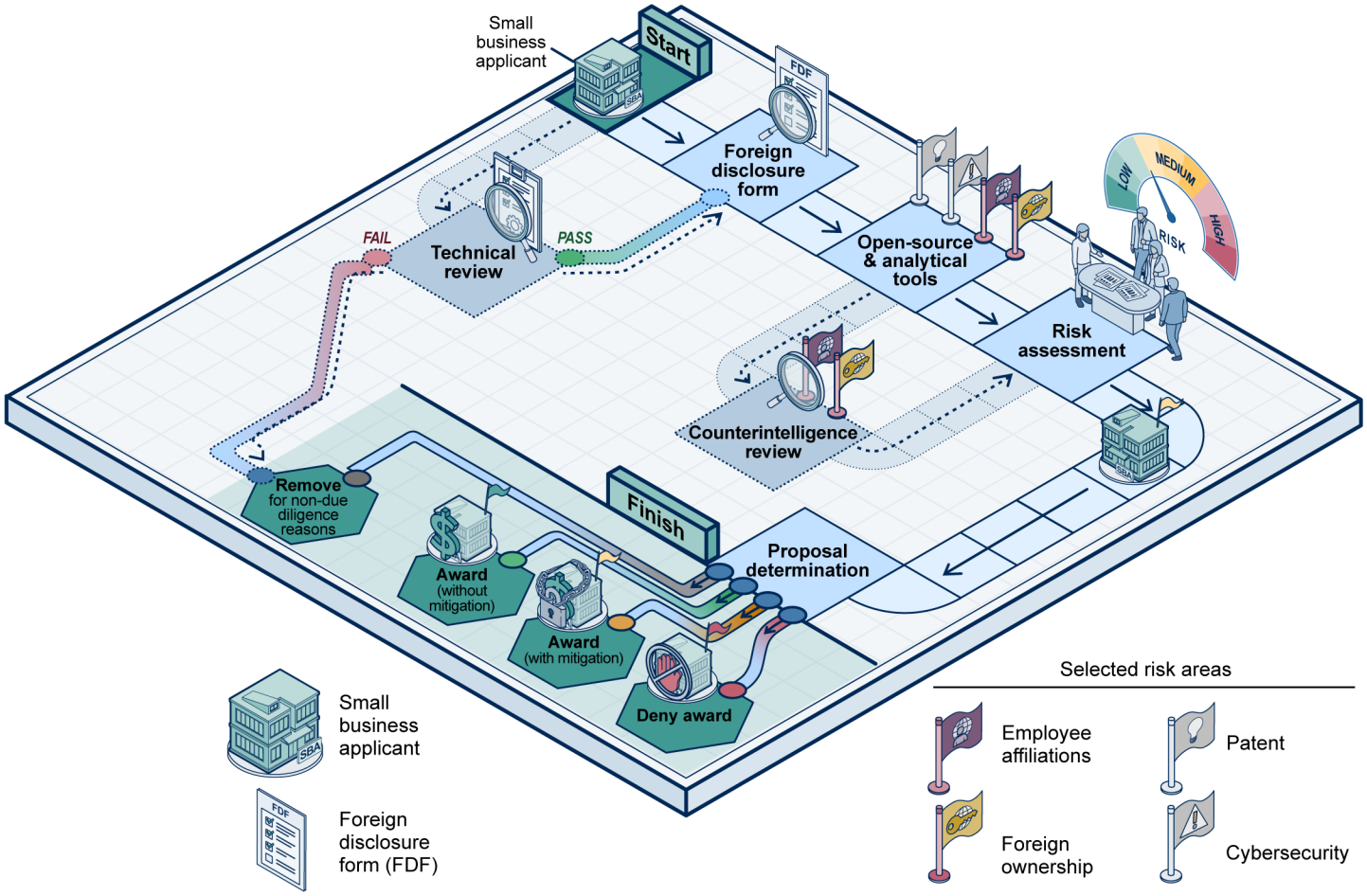


Source: GAO analysis of agency documents and requirements in the SBIR and STTR Extension Act of 2022; GAO (illustrations). | GAO-27-108923

Note: The examples of individuals and factors noted in the figure are not comprehensive in nature. An agency may consider other individuals and factors based on its review of due diligence information.

We found that the due diligence process for the five selected agencies includes several common steps (see fig. 2). The next section details the due diligence processes for the agencies we reviewed.

Figure 2: Generalized Process for the SBIR and STTR Foreign Risk Due Diligence Program



SBIR = Small Business Innovation Research program
STTR = Small Business Technology Transfer program

Source: SBIR and STTR Extension Act of 2022, GAO analysis of agency documents and interviews (content); GAO (illustrations). | GAO-27-108923

Agencies Use Applicant Disclosures to Identify Foreign Risks

All five agencies (Air Force, DOE, NASA, NIH, NSF) collect information from applicants to identify both foreign ownership and employee affiliations risks. Key to this process is the foreign disclosure form, a standardized set of questions that SBA developed, which requires SBIR and STTR applicants to disclose foreign affiliations and relationships to foreign countries. Table 1 shows topics derived from longer questions on the form, and how these topics relate to foreign ownership and employee affiliations risk areas, according to SBA.

Table 1: Topics on the Small Business Administration's Foreign Disclosure Form

Foreign disclosure form topic	Foreign ownership risk area	Employee affiliations risk area
Malign foreign talent recruitment program		✓
Based in or receives funding from foreign country of concern (FCOC)	✓	✓
Current or pending contractual or financial obligations with a foreign-owned enterprise or any foreign entity		✓
Whole ownership in a foreign country	✓	
Venture capital or institutional investment	✓	✓
General partner or leadership individual of investing entity affiliation with an FCOC	✓	✓
Technology licensing or intellectual property sales or transfers to an FCOC within last 5 years		✓
Relationship to a foreign business entity, offshore entity, or entity outside the U.S.		✓
Foreign affiliation with a research institution located in an FCOC	✓	✓

Source: GAO analysis of Small Business Administration documents and interviews with officials. | GAO-27-108923

As shown in table 1, disclosure questions may be used to identify risks within one or both of the risk areas we examined. Officials from all selected agencies told us that the disclosure form is a key source of information used to identify foreign risks. For example, when an applicant to NIH discloses on the form that it has foreign investors or foreign collaborations, NIH conducts a preliminary due diligence review to either clear the proposal or determine that further assessment is needed.[18] The process is slightly different at NASA: officials told us that the agency uses the form to corroborate information identified from other parts of the process—such as those uncovered by analytical tools (described below).

DOE, NIH, and NSF officials told us they use two additional required forms to identify applicants' foreign risks: a biographical sketch and current and pending support form (see table 2).

[18]NIH conducts due diligence on all proposals that are likely to be funded.

Table 2: Foreign Disclosures in the Biographical Sketch and Current and Pending Support Form

Activity type	Type of form	
	Biographical sketch	Current and pending support
Academic, professional, or institutional positions that are full-time, part-time, or voluntary	✓	
Current and pending domestic or foreign support		✓
Current or pending participation in, or applications to, programs sponsored by foreign governments or entities, including foreign talent recruitment programs	✓	✓

Source: GAO analysis of agency documents. | GAO-27-108923

These forms request, respectively, the academic, research, and professional histories of applicants and information on their current and pending research funding awards. Both forms also require individuals to certify that they are not party to a malign foreign talent recruitment program (see sidebar).

Applicants may not disclose all relevant information about foreign ownership or employee affiliations risk, and officials at all five agencies told us that they have processes in place to discover such information. Generally, these processes closely resemble the processes agencies use to verify applicant disclosures, such as open-source information and analytical tools. The appropriate office at each agency (e.g., SBIR and STTR program office, research security office, or due diligence team) reviews the entirety of the proposal, including the foreign disclosure form, to determine whether an applicant failed to disclose foreign affiliations, as well as the extent of the nondisclosure. Four of the agencies we reviewed (Air Force, DOE, NASA, NSF) told us that if they find information that an applicant did not initially disclose, the proposal may be considered higher risk or denied, depending on the nature of the risk.

Malign Foreign Talent Recruitment Programs

Foreign talent recruitment programs seek to recruit researchers, sometimes with malign intent. A malign foreign talent recruitment program is one in which a foreign country of concern or an entity based therein provides some form of compensation to an individual in exchange for certain activities enumerated under 42 U.S.C. § 19237(4)(A).

For example, China oversees hundreds of talent programs (sometimes called talent plans), which recruit science and technology professors, researchers, students, and others to apply. For China's malign foreign talent recruitment programs, participants are incentivized to steal foreign technologies needed to advance the country's national, military, and economic goals. China's talent programs have recruited participants worldwide for programs involving fields such as military technology, nuclear energy, wind tunnel design, and advanced lasers.

We have previously reported on this topic as it relates to due diligence, as well as research security more broadly. For example, in January 2026, we found that DOD, DOE, and NIH each developed a profile of improper foreign influence, which includes affiliation with a malign foreign talent recruitment program, as well as other factors. GAO, Research Security: Agencies Should Assess Safeguards Against Discrimination, GAO-26-107544 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 21, 2026).

Source: GAO analysis of government reports. | GAO-27-108923

Agencies Verify Applicant Information Through Various Mechanisms

All five agencies we reviewed verify applicant-provided disclosure information and further identify foreign ownership and employee affiliations risks with one or more of the following mechanisms.

Open-source reviews. All five agencies use publicly available information to verify applicant disclosures. For example, Air Force receives reports using open sources that highlight ownership structure, financing activity, and employee connections. DOE checks businesses and individuals against public U.S. entity lists, such as the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons list ("SDN List"), according to officials.

Analytical tools. All five agencies use agency-developed or commercial analytical tools to verify applicant disclosures and identify foreign risks. For example, the Air Force's Office of Commercial and Economic Analysis (OCEA) developed a tool that provides analysts with aggregated business assessment data for the initial identification of all commercial, regulatory, and foreign influence risks posed by small business applicants. Commercial tools may include datasets with company financial history and investor information and analytic dashboards that provide real-time ratings of the risks of financial and foreign influence. DOE's research security office uses a suite of commercial analytical tools that enable tracking of supply chain relationships and analysis of patenting activity, as well as investigation into past academic affiliations and co-authorships.[19]

Direct engagement. Officials at two agencies (DOE, NSF) told us that they often follow up directly with applicants to request additional information or clarification on foreign affiliations and relationships. NSF officials stated that the agency's due diligence process is primarily direct engagement with companies, with practices inherited from the private sector (e.g., investors engaging with founders in person to determine if funding the business is worthwhile).

Counterintelligence review. Four agencies (Air Force, DOE, NASA, NIH) refer certain proposals flagged for foreign risk during initial review to

[19]DOE's Office of Research, Technology, and Economic Security (RTES) reviews this information. In this report, we refer to this office and others with similar functions as research security offices.

counterintelligence offices.[20] These offices use additional data sources and mechanisms specific to the intelligence community to further identify potential foreign risks. For example, Air Force counterintelligence officials explained that, while their review process is not substantially different from that of the SBIR and STTR program office, their office has access to additional unclassified and classified data sources, such as visa data. DOE counterintelligence officials explained that their review is looking to confirm, refute, or expand upon the existing findings from the research security office. The counterintelligence office then provides its findings to the referring office for consideration in the final risk assessment. Sometimes, counterintelligence reviews identify foreign affiliations or relationships that the applicant did not disclose. HHS counterintelligence officials said they evaluate the identified nondisclosures, considering factors such as whether it is a first-time occurrence for the individual or entity and whether any individual or the small business maintains relationships with known or suspected foreign defense organizations.

Agencies Use Tools and Hold Risk Review Meetings to Assess and Mitigate Foreign Risks

After identifying risks, agencies we reviewed assess those risks and mitigate them as needed. All five agencies told us they assess both foreign ownership and employee affiliations risks concurrently using one or more of the following methods:

Risk assessment tools. Four agencies (Air Force, DOE, NASA, NIH) assess identified foreign risks using specific tools that help them document due diligence findings and ensure consistent procedures across analysts. For example:

- The Air Force (along with all other DOD components) uses a risk matrix that provides factors for assessing a small business applicant and a covered individual's foreign control, influence, obligations, and affiliations. The matrix also provides key definitions that help the agency make SBIR and STTR award decisions, such as specific risk factors that prohibit the agency from making an award and risk factors discouraged by agency policy where mitigation measures are required. The matrix outlines when mitigation measures are suggested, recommended, required, or not needed.

[20]There is no Extension Act requirement for agencies to refer proposals to or otherwise use counterintelligence offices to identify, assess, or mitigate foreign risks. NSF officials told us that the agency does not have counterintelligence resources, but as a member of the National Counterintelligence Task Force the agency is able to coordinate with civilian and military agency partners and the intelligence community if research security issues arise.

- At DOE, risk analysts at the research security office complete a review checklist as they conduct due diligence. The checklist includes factors such as funding from foreign countries of concern and participation in a malign foreign talent recruitment program. Risk analysts then determine an overall risk level and provide mitigation recommendations for the proposal based on the findings of their review. This assessment is provided to DOE's SBIR and STTR program office for consideration in the final award decision.
- NASA officials told us that its risk assessment tools enable standardization of due diligence findings and ensure continuity across analysts and decision-makers.
- NSF officials explained that their assessment using analytical tools includes determination of an applicant's possible risk versus actual risk. For example, an analytical tool could raise a flag that a company had undisclosed financial support; the program director then verifies whether that potential risk is an actual foreign risk.

Risk review meetings. Four agencies (Air Force, DOE, NASA, NIH) hold meetings with relevant internal stakeholders to review an applicant's proposal and any identified foreign risks to determine the award result. For example, NIH officials said analysts from NIH's Office of Research Services and the HHS counterintelligence office meet to assess risk of the applicants' involvement with foreign countries of concern based on criteria described in the Extension Act. In these meetings, the assessment team presents an executive summary of due diligence findings, including risk ratings for foreign affiliations, foreign ownership and control, and financial obligations.

Research security office review. One agency (NSF) requests reviews from its agencywide research security office for instances where a foreign risk is identified. NSF program officials explained that they did not use any commercially developed risk assessment tools to assess foreign ownership in FY2024 or FY2025. Instead, they used an agency-developed toolkit to assess employee affiliations as part of internal reviews by the research security office. NSF published a framework to assess agency-funded projects for foreign risk in June 2024, and research security officials told us that they refined the framework through FY2025. Officials also told us that award decisions are made

collaboratively between the SBIR and STTR program office and the research security office.[21]

Mitigation approaches. After assessing risks, the five agencies take different mitigation approaches to address foreign risk in an applicant. Officials at three agencies (Air Force, DOE, NASA) told us they may engage with small businesses during the application process to understand potential risks or encourage applicants to reduce their risk profile. In most cases, proposals will have one of the following results: awarded, awarded with mitigation, or denied.

NIH mitigates foreign risk by denying the award. In other cases, (Air Force, DOE, NASA, NSF) the agency may issue the award but use mitigation approaches, such as more frequent monitoring. Table 3 shows examples of mitigation approaches put in place by the five selected agencies.

Table 3: Examples of Potential Mitigation Approaches Cited by Five Selected Agencies

Agency	Potential approach and result
Air Force	• Require that the small business not use any hardware branded from a specific foreign company in the performance of or for the duration of the award. • Prohibit covered individuals, including all employees named in the proposal, from publishing any academic papers with any individuals or entities located within a foreign country of concern for the duration of the performance period on the subject proposal. Possible result: Award—include as a contract stipulation.
Department of Energy	• Required prior notice of academic co-authorship with individuals in foreign countries of concern. • Remove a risky individual from the application and do not allow them to perform work on the awarded project or prevent the individual from accessing relevant data. Possible result: Award—signed mitigation agreement.
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	• Obtain an agreement in writing stating that a small business with an intellectual property transfer agreement with a foreign country of concern will not share certain information, technology, or data with that country. • Ensure awardee compliance with surveillance plan mitigations such as contract deliverables. Possible result: Award—discussion with awardee or coordination between NASA contracting entities.
National Institutes of Health	• Deny any SBIR or STTR proposal flagged for foreign ownership or employee affiliations risks. Possible result: Award denial.

[21]In July 2026, NSF developed a risk assessment tool to assess foreign risks in the SBIR and STTR programs.

Agency	Potential approach and result
National Science Foundation	Ensure that a small business does not interact with or use technologies from a banned company before or after the award. Modify or remove certain investments that could pose a foreign risk. Possible result: Award—company self-certification or award terms and conditions.

Source: GAO analysis of agency interviews. | GAO-27-108923

NIH officials said that applicants may reapply during subsequent SBIR or STTR solicitation cycles even if they have been denied an award. Applicants can also review example case studies and training materials on NIH's foreign risk management website to determine possible issues before resubmitting their application. NIH officials added that they have seen some applicants reduce their risk level using these resources.

Agencies Use Various Approaches to Track Foreign Risk Data

We found that all five selected agencies maintain or track data on due diligence activities associated with foreign ownership and employee affiliations risks. These practices align with the SBA best practice that encourages agencies to compile metrics on proposals that underwent due diligence, and federal internal control standards, which state that agencies should obtain relevant and reliable data to produce quality information.[22] In addition, agencies track these data using a variety of methods such as automated systems, databases or spreadsheets, manual systems, or a combination of these methods.

Agencies Maintain Data on Foreign Ownership and Employee Affiliations Risks

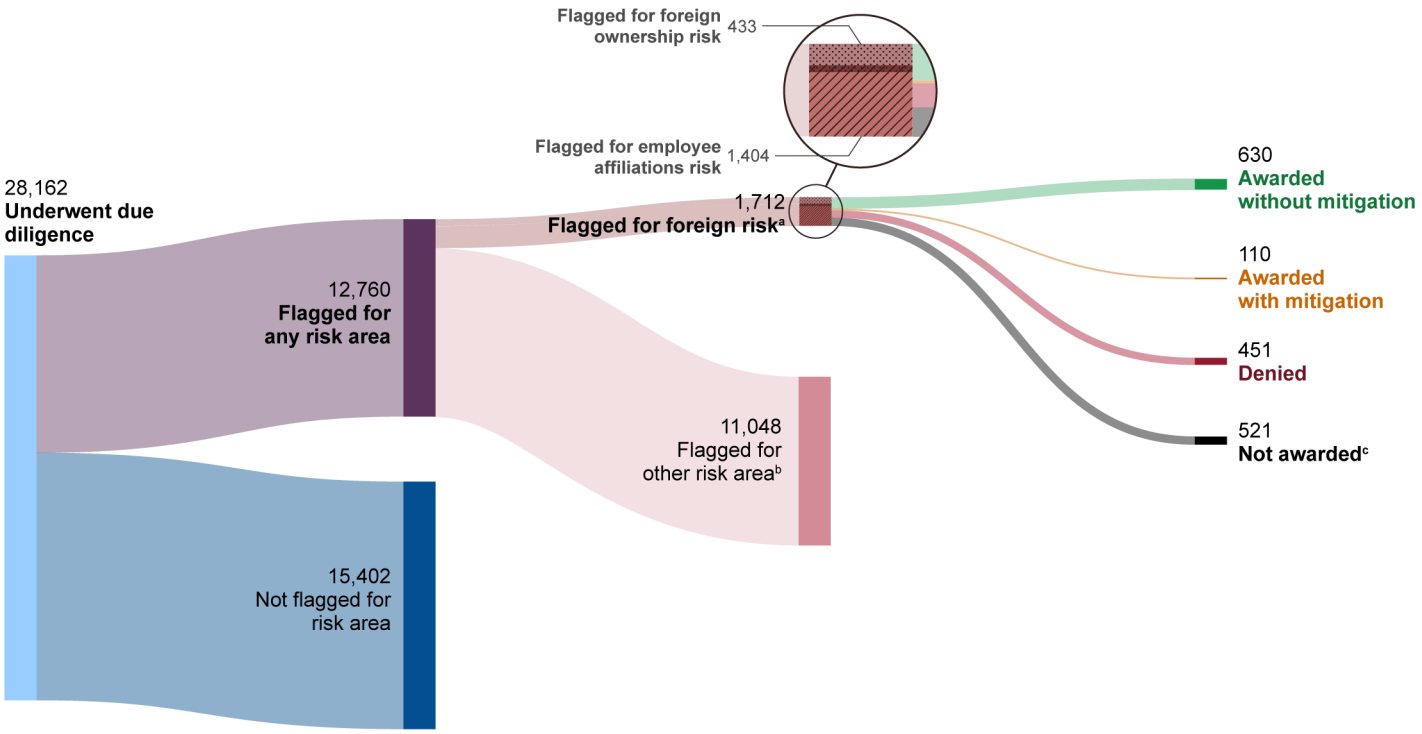
We found that all five of the agencies we reviewed (Air Force, DOE, NASA, NIH, NSF) maintained data on due diligence activities associated with foreign ownership and employee affiliations risks. According to agency data we reviewed, in FY2024 and FY2025, the five agencies received over 53,000 SBIR and STTR proposals and performed due diligence on more than half of these (over 28,000; see fig. 3).[23] Of the 1,712 proposals flagged for either foreign risk, agencies awarded 740 (with and without mitigation) and denied 451.[24]

[22]GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO-25-107721 (Washington, D.C.: May 2025).

[23]In our previous reporting, we found some agencies conduct due diligence on all proposals received while others initially do a technical merit review and then conduct due diligence on proposals that are likely to be funded (i.e., meritorious proposals). See GAO-26-107972 for additional information.

[24]For the purposes of this report, a flag is defined as any possible risk identified by the agency over the course of the due diligence process.

Figure 3: Foreign Risks Identified and Results for Five Selected Agencies, Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025



Source: GAO analysis of agency SBIR and STTR data. | GAO-27-108923

Note: This figure shows the number of SBIR and STTR proposals that went through each step of the due diligence process.

[a]Values of Flagged for foreign ownership risk and Flagged for employee affiliations risk do not total to Flagged for foreign risk because a proposal may include more than one risk area flagged.

[b]Other risk areas may include the two other Extension Act risk areas, cybersecurity practices and patents, or agency-specific risks beyond the Extension Act risk areas. For example, Air Force also includes areas such as technology transfer to adversarial nations or high fraud probability.

[c]"Not awarded" means that a proposal was not awarded or otherwise removed from consideration for reasons not solely related to due diligence findings, such as failure to meet technical merit.

Table 4 shows the number of proposals that underwent due diligence and the specific risk area flagged in FY2024 and FY2025 by agency. Of the 53,051 total proposals received, Air Force received almost half. Air Force also flagged 43 percent (185) of all foreign ownership and 32 percent (454) of all employee affiliations risks during this period.

Table 4: Five Agencies' Reported Foreign Risks Flagged for SBIR and STTR Proposals, Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025

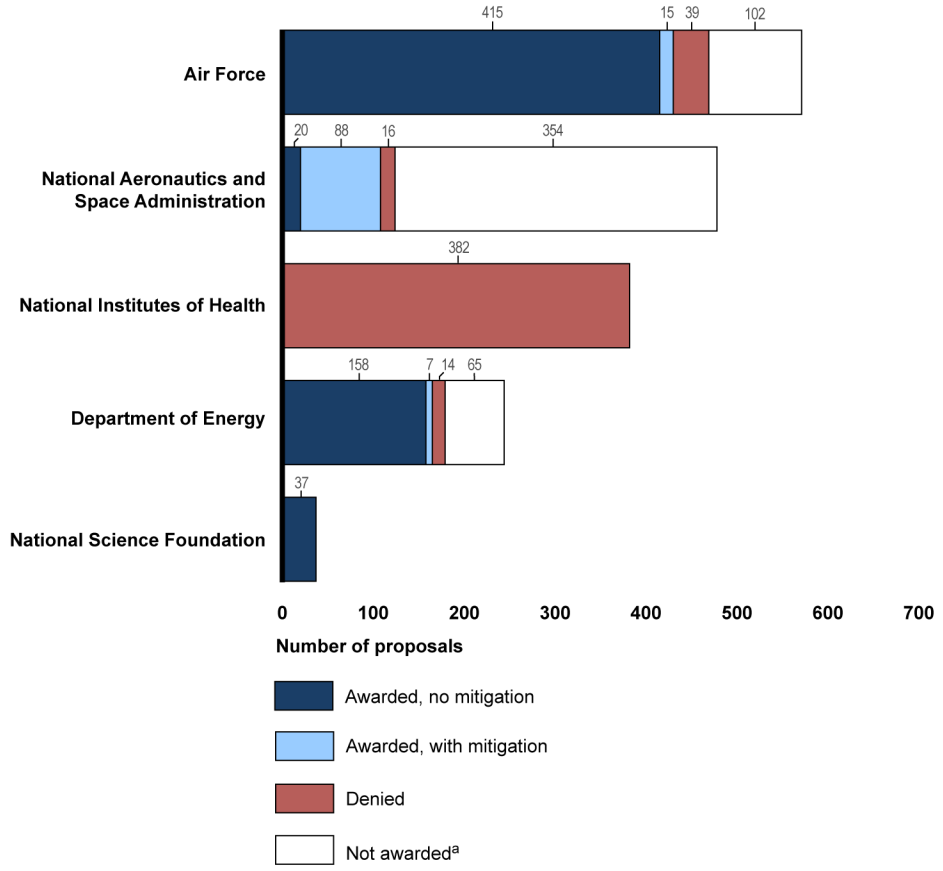
Agency	Total received	Underwent due diligence	Selected Extension Act risk area		
			Flagged for any risk[a]	Foreign ownership	Employee affiliations
Air Force	**21,067**	21,067	11,124	185	454
National Institutes of Health	**18,127**	3,366	534	20	369
Department of Energy	**5,213**	1,054	512	43	209
National Science Foundation	**4,777**	682	37	2	35
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	**3,867**	1,993	553	183	337
Totals	**53,051**	**28,162**	**12,760**	**433**	**1,404**

Source: GAO analysis of agency SBIR and STTR data. | GAO-27-108923

[a]These risks include those that relate to all four Extension Act risk areas—foreign ownership, employee affiliations, patent, and cybersecurity—as well as other types of risks.

Once a proposal is flagged for a risk, four results are possible: award without mitigation, award with mitigation, denial, or removal for other reasons. Figure 4 shows the results of proposals that were flagged for a foreign risk by agency in FY2024 and FY2025. For example, Air Force awarded without mitigation (415), awarded with mitigation (15), and denied (39), while NIH denied (382) all awards with a flag for a foreign risk during this period.

Figure 4: Five Agencies' Reported Results of Foreign Risks Flagged for SBIR and STTR Proposals, Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025



Source: GAO analysis of agency SBIR and STTR data. | GAO-27-108923

[a]"Not awarded" means that a proposal was not awarded or otherwise removed from consideration for reasons not solely related to due diligence findings, such as failure to meet technical merit.

For this report, we selected six to seven applicant proposals per agency from FY2025 to better understand how agencies were identifying and mitigating risks associated with foreign ownership and employee affiliations.[25] Table 5 provides illustrative examples of risks that the selected agencies identified, along with steps, if any, taken to mitigate each risk.

[25]See appendix I for additional information on the sample selection of FY2025 applicant proposals.

Table 5: Illustrative Examples of Foreign Risks Identified by Five Selected Agencies, Fiscal Year 2025

	Risk area	
Agency	**Foreign ownership**	**Employee affiliations**
Air Force	The founder of the parent company graduated from a university in China. The parent company reduced its stake but maintains approximately 30 percent ownership shares for a small business working on heat sensor technologies. Result: The agency awarded the proposal without mitigation.	A manager at a small business had education, employment, authorship, and co-authorship affiliations with entities and research institutions in a foreign country of concern, some of which were undisclosed. Result: The agency awarded the proposal with mitigation.
Department of Energy	A small business received a letter of support from a company that had office locations in China and whose founding and venture partners previously had connections to Chinese entities. Result: The agency awarded the proposal without mitigation.	Two principal investigators at a computer engineering company had numerous academic co-authorships with a researcher who is currently a professor at a university in China that is on multiple U.S. restricted party lists. Result: The agency denied the proposal.
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	A small business applicant had an employee with foreign education more than 30 years ago. The business also received foreign investment from the United Kingdom, Canada, and potentially other countries. Result: The agency awarded the proposal with mitigation—a surveillance plan.	A small business applicant had one or more employees with foreign education or employment in foreign countries. And, the business possibly transferred intellectual property to a foreign entity. Result: The agency denied the proposal.
National Institutes of Health	A small business that developed adaptive apparel maintained an affiliated business entity and employees in China, which it did not properly disclose. Result: The agency denied the proposal.	Key personnel at a small business that develops medicines had undisclosed affiliations and ties with companies and universities in China. Result: The agency denied the proposal.
National Science Foundation	A small business had a foreign investor—a venture capital firm with a team based in the United Kingdom, Europe, and Southeast Asia. The investors had the right to receive future equity. Result: The agency awarded the proposal without mitigation.	A small business had an employee who had publications with international coauthors with suspected ties to a foreign malign talent recruitment program. These ties to international coauthors were not disclosed but did not present a research security issue. Result: The agency awarded the proposal without mitigation.

Source: GAO analysis of agency due diligence documents. | GAO-27-108923

Agencies Track Foreign Risk Data Using Various Methods

All five of the agencies we reviewed (Air Force, DOE, NASA, NIH, NSF) tracked foreign risk data using various methods during FY2024 and FY2025. We found that these five agencies track data on identified risks using automated systems, databases or spreadsheets, manual systems, or a combination of these methods. Three agencies (DOE, NASA, NIH) use shared databases or spreadsheets to track a proposal's due diligence progress, as well as other information unique to each agency's award

process.[26] One agency (Air Force) uses a combination of automated and manual systems; some of the systems are specific to the Air Force and others also serve other federal agencies.

Another agency (NSF) employed a combination of a shared spreadsheet, database, and manual data gathering either by individual program directors or by other NSF staff. NSF officials told us the agency did not have a standardized approach for data collection efforts on identified foreign risks in FY2024 or FY2025. For example, in FY2024, it relied on program directors to individually track due diligence tasks performed for each proposal (e.g., saved emails or a local spreadsheet).

Since then, NSF officials told us the agency has taken steps to strengthen its data collection and tracking of its due diligence program. For example, the research security office at NSF has been more involved in the due diligence process and data collection efforts, according to officials. NSF also noted ongoing and planned actions to address prior recommendations we made to help strengthen the agency's due diligence program. In January 2026, we recommended that NSF develop a consistent method to track its due diligence activities and update its SBIR and STTR due diligence plan with a risk-based approach and procedures for conducting a risk assessment in the four Extension Act risk areas.[27] NSF agreed with these recommendations, and in June 2026, the agency noted that it is developing a risk matrix, an internal database, and a standard operating procedure for the program.[28] NSF plans to complete these efforts by September 30, 2026. Furthermore, in July 2026, NSF officials described additional steps the agency plans to take to bolster its due diligence efforts. These steps include: hiring staff to help manage proposal decisions and having the research security office perform due diligence reviews on all proposals rather than only Phase II proposals.[29] By taking such actions, NSF can enhance its ability to collect and track

[26]NIH officials told us that its due diligence staff maintain up-to-date statuses of due diligence progress and results for all proposals. However, unlike grants data, contracts data cannot be stored on NIH's grant system.

[27]GAO-26-107972.

[28]We collected and reviewed these documents. As of July 20, 2026, the risk matrix and standard operating procedures were finalized while the internal database was still pending.

[29]For FY2024 and FY2025, the NSF research security office reviewed Phase II proposals only.

possible foreign risks in its SBIR and STTR program, thereby protecting U.S. economic and national security interests.

Four agencies (Air Force, DOE, NASA, NIH) noted that their tracking of due diligence data facilitated future risk management. For example:

- Air Force officials told us that maintaining a historical record for a specific small business applicant enables the agency to potentially reassess its risk rating, since risks can change over time.
- DOE officials told us that DOE's data collection process allows it to identify higher-risk technology areas and dedicate resources accordingly.
- NASA counterintelligence officials said that, because of their tracking efforts, they are able to follow up with small business awardees developing potential dual-use technologies to educate them on national security threats posed by foreign adversaries, such as China.[30]
- NIH officials told us that tracking such data allows the agency to better understand the evolving threat landscape.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOD, DOE, HHS, NASA, NSF, and SBA for review and comment.

DOD, HHS, and SBA provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. For example, HHS officials clarified that NIH conducts due diligence on all proposals that are likely to be funded. To be consistent with NIH's processes, we updated the wording of the statement to reflect this.

DOE, NASA, and NSF did not have any comments on the report.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees; the Secretaries of Defense, Energy, and Health and Human Services; the Administrators of the SBA and NASA; the Director of the

[30]Dual-use technologies have both military and commercial applications. For example, certain technologies developed for NASA via the SBIR and STTR process could also have potential use for military components. For more information, see GAO, *DOD Critical Technologies: Plans for Communicating, Assessing, and Overseeing Protection Efforts Should Be Completed*, GAO-21-158 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 12, 2021).

NSF; and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at http://www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at wrightc@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Media Relations may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.

//SIGNED//

Candice N. Wright
Director, Science, Technology Assessment, and Analytics

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Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The SBIR (Small Business Innovation Research) and STTR (Small Business Technology Transfer) Extension Act of 2022 includes provisions for GAO to issue a series of reports on the implementation of agencies' due diligence programs to assess security risks presented by a small business seeking a federally funded award. This report, the fourth in the series, examines (1) how selected agencies identify, assess, and mitigate foreign ownership and employee affiliations risks; and (2) the extent to which selected agencies track and collect data on foreign ownership and employee affiliations risks.

The scope of our work includes the Small Business Administration (SBA) and five selected participating agencies: Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Energy (DOE), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and National Science Foundation (NSF). We selected these five because they issued the highest number of awards annually in fiscal year (FY) 2024. They also accounted for nearly 95 percent of SBIR and STTR awards in FY2024. For the three agencies with more than one component that issues awards (DOD, DOE, and HHS), we selected the component that issues the highest number of awards annually based on FY2024 award data, which were the most complete available at the time of our review.[1] Specifically, we focused on the Department of the Air Force in DOD, the Office of Science in DOE, and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in HHS. Throughout the report, when we refer to "selected agencies" it includes these agencies and component entities (i.e., Air Force, NIH). The Office of Science in DOE oversaw the SBIR and STTR program on behalf of other components in the agency for FY2024 and FY2025; therefore, we refer to the parent agency (DOE) in our collective "selected agencies."[2]

We reviewed agencies' due diligence processes and risks identified in FY2024 and FY2025, as these were the first two full award cycles during which agencies were required to implement due diligence programs.

To address our first objective, we collected and reviewed the following information:

[1]In this report, for DOD and HHS, we refer to the component—Air Force and NIH, respectively—we reviewed rather than the agency.

[2]On April 28, 2026, DOE announced that it moved the agency's SBIR and STTR programs to the Office of Technology Commercialization.

- selected agencies' due diligence policies and procedures for identifying, assessing, and mitigating foreign ownership and employee affiliations risks such as agency due diligence plans, review checklists, risk review meeting materials, and assessment reports; and
- selected agencies' SBIR and STTR application materials, such as solicitations, applicant disclosure forms, and information available on public websites.

In addition, we developed semi-structured interview questions for agency officials on their processes for addressing foreign ownership and employee affiliations risks in their due diligence programs. These interviews included officials in SBIR and STTR program offices and research security offices, as appropriate. We also interviewed officials at the four selected agencies and components that have counterintelligence offices: Air Force, DOE, HHS, and NASA. Finally, we interviewed SBA officials to gain additional perspective on how participating agencies approach foreign risk management.

For the second objective, we collected and analyzed the following information:

- SBIR and STTR proposal-level data from each of the five selected agencies for FY2024 and FY2025. We requested and received from each of the five agencies proposal-level data with the following data fields: unique proposal identifier; award phase (Phase I or Phase II);[3] proposals flagged for any risk area, foreign ownership risk area, or employee affiliations risk area;[4] and the result of each proposal—awarded without mitigation, awarded with mitigation, denied, or removed for reasons not solely related to due diligence findings. We assessed the reliability of these data and checked for completeness and accuracy—for example, by performing electronic data tests for

[3]For the purposes of this report, we included the following types of awards under Phase II: Direct to Phase II, Direct Phase II, Phase IIB, Sequential Phase II, and Fast-Track. Fast-Track is a program where small business applicants can submit a single proposal that allows fast and seamless transition from Phase I to Phase II funding. The following types of awards are out of scope: Strategic Funding Increase (STRATFI), Tactical Funding Increase (TACFI), Commercialization Readiness Program, and Phase III.

[4]For the purposes of this report, a flag is defined as any possible risk identified by the agency over the course of the due diligence process. A flag can be raised by an agency's office (e.g., the SBIR and STTR program office, research security office, or counterintelligence office), a tool (e.g., agency-developed or commercial analytical tool), or agency mechanism (e.g., direct engagement with a company).

missing data and outliers. In three instances, we discovered irregularities with agencies' data. We clarified with the respective agencies, which provided updated data or satisfactory explanations. Therefore, we determined the data to be reliable for our purposes.

- Selected agencies' SBIR and STTR due diligence program policies and procedures, such as the due diligence plan.
- Interviews with agency officials and written responses to questions and requests for information to better understand the agencies' SBIR and STTR data environments and procedures. For example, we asked agencies about the system(s) used to collect and track SBIR and STTR due diligence data, steps they take to ensure data reliability, and different stakeholders involved in the process (e.g., the SBIR and STTR program office, research security office, and counterintelligence office).
- Evidence of the systems selected agencies used to collect or track due diligence data, such as the name and characteristics of the system or database or a snapshot of the spreadsheet used for such tracking.
- For each selected agency, we selected and reviewed six or seven proposals from FY2025 where the agency identified one or both risk areas. We selected six to seven proposals as a small, judgmental, non-generalizable sample for each agency. The proposals selected included: Phase I and Phase II; each of the four possible results (awarded with and without mitigation, denied, or removed for other reasons); and flagged for either foreign ownership risk or employee affiliations risk, or both. We reviewed these proposal documents to better understand how agencies identified and mitigated risks associated with foreign ownership and employee affiliations. Further, these selected FY2025 proposals helped us to provide illustrative examples in our report (see table 5).

Based on our review of agencies' data, documents, interviews, and written responses, we determined whether each agency met or did not meet the SBA best practice to measure due diligence outcomes. We also reviewed agencies' practices against federal internal control standards for using quality information.[5] We analyzed the best practice and federal internal control standards and determined (1) the level of evidence

[5]GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO-25-107721 (Washington, D.C.: May 2025).

required, (2) the number of elements, and (3) the elements required for both data collection and data tracking efforts for FY2024 and FY2025.

We conducted this performance audit from February 2026 to November 2026 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Candice N. Wright, wrightc@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Farahnaaz Khakoo-Mausel (Assistant Director), Minda Nicolas (Analyst-in-Charge), Alex Francesconi, and AJ Melhus made key contributions to this report. In addition, Steven Flint, Jenny Chanley, Patrick Harner, Ben Shouse, and Ryan Han contributed to the report.

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