



OCP 2026

CALL FOR JOINT RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Application Guidelines

Field of Cooperation in

Security Research

In the Priority Research Area of

**Energy security, Biosafety and Biosecurity,
and Water safety and security**



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I. Purpose & Scope

The International Science and Technology Centre (ISTC) invites proposals for collaborative research projects linking institutions from its Central Asian and Caucasus member countries (Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; hereafter referred to as the “CAC countries”) with partners in Japan. The primary objective of this initiative is to foster cross-border scientific collaboration, excellence in research and innovation and addressing global security challenges.

The International Science and Technology Center (ISTC) is an intergovernmental organization established in 1992 that focuses on **non-proliferation, CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear) risk mitigation, and the peaceful, sustainable application of science and technology**. Originally created to redirect former Soviet weapons scientists toward civilian research, its mission has evolved to address global security challenges, foster international collaboration, and promote a culture of safety and responsibility in scientific research.

Additionally, this joint call aims to enhance **regional research capacity** and foster **long-term international research networks** by promoting **researcher mobility** and involving **early-career researchers***.

* An early-career researcher is a scientist who has obtained their Ph.D. within the past eight years or is currently a Ph.D. candidate.

II. Priority Research Areas

Eligible proposals must align with ISTC’s objective of promoting research excellence in security research to contribute to non-proliferation and CBRN risk mitigation. Thematic priorities include **Energy security, Biosafety and Biosecurity, and Water safety and security**.

- Energy Security research focuses on ensuring reliable, affordable and sustainable access to energy. This includes researching emerging nuclear technologies and developing new materials for renewable energy.
- Biosafety and biosecurity research aims to reduce risks from biological materials and pathogens to safeguard human health, the environment, and public safety. It may involve interdisciplinary approaches such as data science, biotechnology, and synthetic biology.
- Water Safety and Security research focuses on ensuring reliable access to safe, clean water while safeguarding water resources from contamination, scarcity, and other potential threats. This scope covers a wide range of research fields, including advanced remote sensing technologies.

III. Eligibility Criteria

1. Requirements for joint research frameworks

- Proposals must involve at least **two research groups**: one from research institutions and/or universities of one of the eligible CAC countries, and one from research institutions and/or universities of **Japan**. These research groups are forming the **research consortia**.
- Proposals involving an additional research group from other CAC country and/or other countries in Europe, US and beyond are more advantageous, as **cross-border scientific collaboration** is encouraged.
- The research consortium is led by the **Leading Institution** based in one of the eligible CAC countries. The Leading Institution designates also a **Lead PI** to serve as **Project Manager**. The Project Manager is responsible for submitting the proposal.
- Each research group appoints a **National Principal Investigator (PI)** with a PhD or equivalent research experience.

2. Requirements for the engagement of early-career researchers and researcher mobility

- Each research group must include at least **one early-career researcher**.
- Early-career researchers should be assigned core tasks within the group, rather than only playing a supporting role.
- To enhance scientific cooperation, each partner team is expected to conduct mutual visits over the course of the project. Priority will be given to mobility opportunities for early-career researchers, including PhD candidates.

IV. Requirements for Collaborative Research Projects

1. Requirements for research proposals

Project proposals must clearly describe the scientific rationale and objectives of the proposed project. The consortium is expected to demonstrate the scientific relevance and feasibility of the project by addressing the following elements:

- clearly outline the background and state of the art of the proposed research topic, posing clear scientific questions.
- demonstrate scientific significance and novelty, with well-defined research objectives.
- the methods and approaches should be specific and appropriate for achieving project objectives.
- a description of the expected scientific results, practical outcomes and potential contributions to the relevant research field.

2. Requirements for project activities

- Each participating research group should have a clearly defined role in the proposed project, leveraging their expertise and scientific strengths. This will enable the research consortium to achieve results that would be unattainable by a single research group.

- Proposals should include training and career development opportunities for early-career researchers, with clearly described activities.
- Proposals should outline specific activities to promote cross-border scientific collaboration, such as knowledge and data sharing, reciprocal laboratory visits, collaborative experiments, joint field surveys, and joint workshops/seminars.
- To ensure clear roles and responsibilities for intellectual property rights management and data handling, it is strongly recommended that the research consortium concludes a Joint Research Agreement.

3. Reporting

ISTC requires consistent documentation of research progress and final outcomes.

- Lead PI/Project manager must submit quarterly technical reports jointly prepared by all partner teams together with financial statements.
- A final project report is mandatory upon completion of the project. This should include an executive summary report, a final technical report, and a brief project presentation summarizing the main results and achievements.

4. Requirements for annual deliverables over the course of the project

- At least one joint publication in a high-impact, peer-reviewed scientific journal (preferably top-tier Q1 and Q2 journal) and/or
- At least one joint workshop or seminar should be organized at one of the participating institutions.

5. Dissemination of research results

- Project participants should ensure the wide dissemination of results through non-exclusive and non-discriminatory terms, such as teaching, open-access publications, and open-source software.
- The ISTC's support must be explicitly acknowledged in all project outputs.

V. Instruction Note for Lead Principal Investigators (Lead PIs)/Project Managers: Criteria for Selecting and Documenting Foreign Collaborators

This instruction note outlines the requirements and criteria for Lead PIs/Project Managers when selecting and documenting foreign research partners from Japan for ISTC-supported projects under this call.

1. Selection Criteria and Scientific Rationale

Lead PI/Project Manager must justify the selection of a foreign collaborator based on specific scientific value rather than general cooperation. The rationale should address:

- **Synergy:** Existing cooperation and shared scientific interests.
- **Expertise and Achievement:** Notable scientific achievements, specialized knowledge and training/mentoring capacity.
- **Unique Resources:** Availability of specific equipment, facilities, or advanced methodologies at the collaborator's institution.
- **Added Value:** How the partner's infrastructure strengthens the project's objectives.

According to the above criteria, the Lead PI/Project Manager must prepare a brief institutional profile and justification of the selected foreign collaborator as part of the proposal documents. (For information on the submission deadline for foreign collaborator's **Institutional Background Note**, please refer to the '**VI. Proposal Preparation and Submission**' section).

2. Defining Concrete Engagement

The Lead PI/Project Manager must ensure the foreign collaborator commits to specific, measurable activities. General statements such as "discussions" or "exchange of opinions" are insufficient. Expected commitments include:

- **Mentoring:** Willingness to visit the project site for mentoring or providing scientific guidance.
- **Personnel Exchange:** Readiness to exchange scientists and early-career researchers for joint work.
- **Research Outputs:** Commitment to work on joint publications, conference presentations, and the development of shared datasets or methodologies.
- **Institutional Hosting:** Specific commitments to host researchers in named laboratories.

3. Mandatory Documentation: Letter of Expression of Interest (Eol)

The foreign collaborator must provide a **Letter of Expression of Interest (Eol)** on official institutional letterhead addressed to the **Lead PI/Project Manager**. (For information on the submission deadline for the Eol, please refer to the '**VI. Proposal Preparation and Submission**' section).

The Eol must include:

- Clear statement of interest in participating in the proposed project.
- **Scientific Specificity:** Detailing specific scientific fields or topics where the collaborator expects mutual benefit.
- **Scientific Collaboration Description:** Detailing specific areas of collaboration expected contributions (visits, mentoring, hosting, etc.), and planned research outputs (joint publications, conference, etc.).
- **Commitment Statement:** Defining the scope of visits, hosting capacity, and whether the cooperation is funded or non-funded.
- **Compliance Confirmation:** A brief statement agreeing to ISTC's ethical standards, research integrity, and data protection rules.
- Contact person(s), date and authorized signature.

** Template for the Eol is available in Annex 3.*

VI. Proposal Preparation and Submission

1. STEP 1: Summary Proposal

- Submitting a **Summary Proposal Application Form**

The Summary Proposal Application Form template (Word file) is available to download from the ISTC website dedicated to this call. <https://www.istc.int/apply-for-research-grants>

The Summary Proposal Application Form must be used exactly as provided and completed in English.

Submission must be made exclusively via email to portal@istc.int by the Lead PIs/Project Managers.

Submission period: **25 April – 30 May 2026** (no later than 17:00 (KZT, UTC+5))

- The following documents are required to submit in addition to the Summary Proposal Application Form.

- 1) **Institute/Organization concurrence letter** from all participating institutions of CAC countries.

** Template for Institute/Organization concurrence letter is available in Annex 1.*

- 2) Foreign collaborator's **Institutional Background Note**: A short profile explaining the foreign partner's relevance and the rationale for their selection.

To justify inclusion of this foreign partner, the Lead PI/Project Manager must describe:

- Short institutional profile of the selected Japanese Institution
- Foreign collaborator's experience in the project's scientific field
- Previous cooperation with the foreign collaborator (if any)
- Why this partner is scientifically appropriate for the proposed project

** Template for Institutional Background Note is available in Annex 2, which is embedded in Summary Proposal Application Form.*

2. STEP 2: Full Proposal

- Submitting a **Full Proposal Application Form**

The Full Proposal Application Form template (Word file) is available to download from the ISTC website dedicated to this call. <https://www.istc.int/apply-for-research-grants>

The Full Proposal Application Form must be used exactly as provided and completed in English.

Submission must be made exclusively via email to portal@istc.int by the Lead PIs/Project Managers.

Only those who have passed the STEP 1 screening are eligible to submit a full proposal.

Submission period: **20 June – 10 August** (no later than 17:00 (KZT, UTC+5))

- The following documents are required to be submitted in addition to the Full Proposal Application Form.

- 1) **Letter of Expression of Interest (Eoi)** from foreign collaborator(s) at Japanese research institutions addressed to the Project Manager / Lead PI confirming their willingness to participate in the proposed joint research project, led by the Leading Institution.

* Template for the EoI is available in Annex 3.

- 2) Upon preparation of the shortlist of proposals recommended for funding, a **Letter of Host Government Concurrence (HGC)** must be obtained from all participating CAC countries. This ensures government approval of the institutes' participation in the project and enables them to conduct research activities within the proposed thematic scope. The HGC is expected to be obtained around **November 2026**.

VII. Review of Proposals

Proposal Assessment and Evaluation Criteria:

Proposals will be accessed through **Expert Peer Review**, followed by the final evaluation by **ISTC Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC)** organized by ISTC Proposal Evaluation Committee.

The expert peer review process will be conducted anonymously. Once the review process is complete, the applicants will be provided with the aggregated comments of the peer reviewers.

1) STEP 1: Initial screening of summary proposals

Summary proposals will be accessed based on whether

- All required documents were submitted.
- The proposal is aligned with the thematic scope of the call.
- The proposal is scientifically significant and novel, with clear research objectives.
- The Project Manager and PIs are scientifically qualified.
- The appropriate foreign collaborator is chosen based on scientific rationale.
- The budget structure is appropriate for the research period.

The ISTC Proposal Evaluation Committee will inform whether to proceed to STEP 2 (full proposal preparation) or no later than **20 June 2026**.

2) STEP 2: Assessment of full proposals by peer reviewers and SAC Final Evaluation

1. Core evaluation criteria for **Expert Peer Review** include:

- Research Plan quality
- Scientific significance
- Validity of research methods & feasibility
- Research impact
- Personnel capacity & research capability (facility, equipment, materials)
- Research ethics and compliance

2. Core evaluation criteria for **SAC Final Evaluation** include:

- Relevance to ISTC goals

Contributing to non-proliferation through civilian security research

- Regional and transboundary benefits

Added value of cross-border collaboration, Career development of early-career researchers and researcher mobility

- Effectiveness of scientific partnership with Japan

Sustainability of international research network, expected research outputs, Benefit to Japanese science

- Scientific quality

Scientific merit, Validity of methodology

- Project management capabilities

Appropriate distribution of tasks among research groups, realistic timeline with key milestones

VIII. Funding Structure and Allowable Cost

Total maximum funding per proposal: **250,000 USD**

Project period: **up to 36 months**

Eligible cost categories are:

- Personal costs for CAC region participants ($\leq 40\%$ of the total project budget)
- Equipment (E)
- Materials and consumables (M) ($E+M \leq 30\%$ of the total project budget)
- Travel for collaboration and meetings (must include international travel costs for Japanese research group) ($\geq 25\%$ of the total project budget)
- Other direct costs ($\approx 3-8\%$ of the total project budget)

Costs associated with custom clearance, transportation, publication, translation and payment for services up to 20,000 USD)

- Overhead/indirect costs ($\approx 3-8\%$ of the total project budget)
- Bank fees ($\approx 1\%$ of total project budget)

IX. Timeline

- **STEP 1 Summary proposal submission**

Submission period: **25 April – 30 May 2026** (no later than 17:00 (KZT, UTC+5))

Notification of the STEP1 result: **no later than 20 June 2026.**

- **STEP 2 Full project proposal submission**

Submission period: **20 June – 10 August 2026** (no later than 17:00 (KZT, UTC+5))

- Assessment and Evaluation: **August – October 2026**
- Expected funding decision by the ISTC Governing Board: **December 2026**
- Project start: no sooner than **January 2027**

X. Documents checklist

item	stage	Submission deadline
Summary Proposal Application Form	STEP 1	30 May 2026
Institute/Organization concurrence letter	STEP 1	30 May 2026
Foreign collaborator's Institutional Background Note	STEP 1	30 May 2026

Full Proposal Application Form	STEP 2	10 August 2026
Letter of Expression of Interest (EoI) from Japanese collaborator	STEP 2	10 August 2026
Letter of Host Government Concurrence (HGC)	STEP 2	November 2026

XI. Q & A

Any questions relating to the call guidelines should be emailed to portal@istc.int no later than 24 April 2026.

The ISTC Secretariat is not obliged to answer any questions via phone calls or messenger apps. Answers to questions submitted via email to the designated address will be published on the ISTC website by 30 April 2026 at the latest.

Write on official Institution's Letter Head

The letter head should include

- Institution name
 - Address (Street address, City, ZIP code, Country)
-

To:

**International Science and Technology Center
«Syganak» Business Center, 70 Syganak street,
12th floor, Astana, Kazakhstan**

MM/DD/YY

PARTICIPATING INSTITUTION CONCURRENCE

Project Title:

The **[Name of Participating Institution]** has reviewed the above Project Proposal and fully accepts the goals and activities as described in the Project Proposal as well as its scope of participation in these activities.

The **[Name of Participating Institution]** acknowledges that project support from the International Science and Technology Center (ISTC) will be subject to the relevant conditions required by the Agreement Establishing an ISTC, ISTC Statute, decisions of its Governing Board, and by a project agreement that this institution may enter into with the ISTC.

Please select:

Project Manager – responsible for overall project activities (*) or

Project Sub-manager – responsible for project activities in the Institution:

Name: _____

Title: _____

Position: _____

Email: _____

Telephone: _____

Signature Authority – empowered to make commitments on behalf of Institution:

Name: _____

Title: _____

Position: _____

Email: _____

Telephone: _____

Signature: _____

(Stamp)

* Nomination of Project Manager designates Institution as Leading Institution.

Subject: **Foreign collaborator's Institutional Background Note**

1. Title of the Collaborative Research Project

Click or tap here to enter your text.

2. Leading institution

Click or tap here to enter your text.

3. Personal Information of Japanese PI (Foreign Collaborator)

Honorific / Title	
Full Name	
Affiliation	
Division/ Department	
Position / Job Title	
Researcher ID	ORCID, ResearchGate or Google Scholar

4. Short institutional profile of the selected Japanese Institution

Click or tap here to enter your text.

5. Foreign collaborator's experience in the scientific field of proposed project

Click or tap here to enter your text.

6. Previous cooperation with the foreign collaborator (if any)

Click or tap here to enter your text.

7. The scientific relevance and defined role of the foreign collaborator in the proposed project

Click or tap here to enter your text.

[Full Name of Project Manager]

[Position / Title]

[Institution Name]

[Address]

[Email], [Phone]

Write on official Institution's Letter Head

The letter head should include

- Institution name
 - Address (Street address, City, ZIP code, Country)
-

To:

Project Manager Name
Position/Title
Institution/Laboratory Name
Address

MM/DD/YY

Subject: **Expression of Interest to Participate in the Project "[Project Title]"**

Dear [Dr./Prof. Surname],

On behalf of [**Name of Affiliated Institution of the Collaborator**], I am pleased to express our interest in participating as an international collaborator in the proposed research project "[**Project Title**]", led by your team at [**Leading Institution**].

Our interest in partnering with [**Leading Institution**] builds upon [**previous joint work etc.**], which we believe creates a strong foundation for impactful cooperation.

We consider this collaboration scientifically valuable due to the alignment of our research activities with the project's focus on, particularly in the following areas:

- Specific scientific field/area 1
- Specific scientific field/area 2
- Specific methodological or technological expertise

Our institution has extensive experience in these fields, demonstrated through [**major achievements, laboratory capabilities, technologies, ongoing programmes**], and we believe that our participation will make a meaningful contribution to achieving the project objectives.

We are ready to contribute to the project through the following activities (please specify concrete forms of engagement, for example):

- supporting the co-development of methodologies, datasets, or experimental procedures where appropriate and knowledge transfer in the above-mentioned scientific fields.
- hosting researchers from your institution at our facilities and conducting scientific visits, providing mentoring and expert consultations.
- exchanging scientists and early-career researchers for training, joint research activities and professional development.
- contributing to joint publications, conference presentations, and other research outputs.
- organization and participation in joint seminars, workshops and meetings.
- other mutually agreed forms of collaboration consistent with project objectives.

[**Name of the Affiliated Institution of the Collaborator**] confirms its readiness to participate as a non-funded (or funded, if applicable) collaborator, subject to alignment with our internal procedures. We will designate [**Name, Position**] as the focal point for the coordination of this partnership.

Write on official Institution's Letter Head

The letter head should include

- Institution name
 - Address (Street address, City, ZIP code, Country)
-

Our institution acknowledges the standards of scientific integrity, transparency, and responsible research conduct associated with this project and agrees to collaborate in conformity with these principles.

We look forward to working together on this promising initiative and contributing to its scientific success.

Best regards,

[Full Name]

[Position / Title]

[Institution Name]

[Address]

[Email], [Phone]