



ITALY - the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation P.R. China - National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COOPERATION CALL FOR JOINT RESEARCH PROPOSALS FOR THE YEARS 2026-2028

CLOSING DATE: December, 6 2025
in Italy at: 12 p.m. CEST – in P.R. China at: 16 p.m. CST

BACKGROUND

Within the framework of the Memorandum of Understanding signed in Beijing on November 17, 2015 between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Italy and the National Natural Science Foundation of China, the Directorate General for Cultural and Economic Promotion and Innovation, Office IX of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) and the Bureau of International Cooperation of the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC), hereinafter referred to as the “Parties”, **are opening a call for Joint Research Projects in the field of natural sciences for the years 2026-2028**. Proposals shall concern activities that exhibit strong bilateral impact by either strengthening existing or creating new links targeting relevant scientific objectives.

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

1.1 FUNDING SCHEMES

With regard to the present call, the funding scheme available is “**Joint Research Projects**”. This funding scheme aims at supporting joint research activities of collaborating Italian and Chinese research groups. Inclusion of early career scientists in the research teams will be positively evaluated. The expenses for research activities are co-funded by both Parties.

1.2 ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

Project proposals:

- must be written in English;
- the project title must be identical in the application to both Parties;
- must have the same duration of the Executive Programme (EP): three (3) years, 2026-2028;
- each Principal Investigator (PI) must submit only one proposal.

Italian Party:

- the call is open to public or private (no-profit) research institutions;
- the Italian PI must have Italian or any other EU nationality, legal residence in Italy, and must be affiliated with a public or private (no-profit) Italian research institution with a permanent or temporary (staff-equivalent) position.

Chinese Party:

- applicant’s support organization must have registered at the NSFC;
- the total number of the programs a researcher with senior rank (title) applies for (either as applicant or PI) and undertakes (either as applicant or PI) shall not exceed two;
- applicants shall only apply for one type of programs once in a year;

- invalid application code;
- no signature on the additional document, i.e., the collaborative agreement;
- for other eligibility rules, please refer to the call for proposal on NSFC's website.

1.3 REASONS FOR EXCLUSION

- Lack of any one of the eligibility requirements listed above;
- incomplete application, according to criteria specified in the call text (including additional documents where applicable - see point 3 below);
- proposals submitted in different priority research areas by the collaborating PIs in the two countries;
- proposals eligible in only one of the two countries.

2. PRIORITY RESEARCH AREAS

Proposals must be submitted in one of the following priority research areas:

- **Environment and Energy**
 - *Production, storage and transport of hydrogen; fuel cells; Energy with reference to renewable energies and advanced distributed generation*
- **Biodiversity**
 - Marine biodiversity
 - Use of advanced technologies for species and ecosystem monitoring and conservation
- **Agrifood**
 - *food quality and safety through innovative scientific models of evaluation and monitoring*
- **Health Science**
 - *Cancer Immunotherapy and Cancer Vaccines; Gene Therapy for Genetic and Rare Diseases*
- **Interdisciplinary projects to be performed on Large Italian and Chinese research infrastructures**
 - *including astronomy, physics, life science, polar and marine science*

Proposals submitted in other research areas will not be considered for evaluation. Not all of the above listed research areas may be funded, depending on the scientific quality of the submitted proposals.

Research proposals involving technologies designed either for military, or for both civil and military applications (so called "dual use" technologies), will not be accepted under the present call due to their inherent risks and ethical implications.

3. SUBMISSION PROCEDURES

Joint proposals must be submitted by the Italian PI to the Italian Party and by the Chinese PI to the Chinese Party with identical English titles, must be written in English and have a duration of three (3) years.

Italian Party

- Principal Investigators shall submit their project proposals exclusively online, by filling the dedicated forms at the following link: <https://pgr.esteri.it/>.
- For projects involving experiments with animals, the status of ethics approval by the competent Ethics Committee must be provided when submitting the proposal. A declaration of submission to the institutional OPBA (*Organismo Preposto al Benessere degli Animali*) in the project description from the PI is acceptable at the proposal submission stage. Please note that formal authorization by the competent Ministry of Health is mandatory to start the activities (D.Lgs 26_04/03/2014 and Directive 2010/63 EU). Projects involving experiments with human beings must be performed in accordance with the Directive 536/2014/EC. *The Italian Principal Investigator should include a self-declaration of adherence to the above cited rules in the Methods section of the proposal.*
- Applications for the Joint Research Projects funding scheme must be accompanied by an **endorsement**

letter signed by the legal representative of the applying Institution or her/his delegate duly authorized by formal provision. The letter, which must be written in Italian using the template available for download at the same URL of the present call, should acknowledge the submission and provide official acceptance of all conditions listed in the call text, including the institutional co-funding listed in the provisional budget section of the proposal. Moreover, if the PI holds a temporary position, the endorsement letter must also certify that, should the contract be terminated before the end of the project, the Institution will replace the PI with another member of the research team, thus ensuring that research activities are carried out without any interruption. The endorsement letter must be uploaded using the dedicated tab of the submission form.

Chinese Party

- The Chinese PI shall submit the application in Chinese through the NSFC's dedicated online platform: <https://grants.nsf.gov.cn> The Chinese PI shall also upload as attachments: the proposal jointly written in English with the Italian PI; the Collaboration Research Agreement, with which the Chinese and Italian PIs define the common research plan, the sharing of workload and the intellectual property rights. For more information on the submission, please refer to the Chinese call text at <https://www.nsf.gov.cn/publish/portal0/tab621/module2809/more.htm>.
- Any inquiry concerning the present call can be sent to: sunlinhao@nsfc.gov.cn

4. EVALUATION OF PROPOSALS AND SELECTION AT NATIONAL AND BILATERAL LEVEL

4.1 EVALUATION PROCESS

After the call closure, all submitted proposals will undergo formal eligibility cross check in both countries, before proceeding to the following two-step evaluation process. The first step is performed at the national level to identify a shortlist of proposals to be considered for funding. In the second step, at bilateral level, the Parties will reach a consensus on the final list of projects eligible for funding in a meeting between representatives from both funding agencies, in the framework of Art. 3 of the above cited MoU. The list of selected projects will be attached to the Joint Declaration that will be posted on the websites of both Parties at the end of the selection process (see point 4.2 below).

The criteria to evaluate the project proposals will be the following:

- *Scientific relevance of the proposed research*
- *Methodology and documentation*
- *Qualification and expertise of the research teams*
- *Added value of the bilateral cooperation*
- *Involvement of early career scientists*
- *Exploitation and dissemination of the results*
- *Budget adequacy*

4.2 PUBLICATION

Italian Party

MAECI will publish the official text of the Joint Declaration, including the list of selected projects, on the MAECI website at the following URL:

https://www.esteri.it/it/diplomazia-culturale-e-diplomazia-scientifica/cooperscientificatecnologica/programmiesecutivi/accordi_programmi_culturali_tecnologici/.

MAECI will inform via e-mail of the outcome of the selection process only the PI of the selected projects.

Chinese Party

For the Chinese Party, funding decisions will be notified through the NSFC's online information system.

Both parties commit not to provide information on selected/excluded projects (excluding the outcomes of the

formal eligibility check mentioned in the point 4.1 above) until the end of the process, with the signature of the Joint Declaration.

5. FUNDING PROCEDURES

Funding will be granted to the projects listed in the Joint Declaration within the limits of the available annual resources of each Party.

Italian Party:

- The funding contribution of MAECI to each project is approximately 30 K€/year. This contribution is granted by MAECI to cover 50% of the total cost of the project. Therefore, matching co-funding by the coordinating Italian Institution equivalent to that granted by MAECI is mandatory. This co-funding can include salaries of the involved personnel and overhead costs.
- According to Italian law N. 401/90, and within the limits of its available annual budget, MAECI will provide funding for the selected projects on a yearly basis and will invite their PIs, with dedicated yearly calls, to submit a funding request at the beginning of each year of project activity.
- The coordinating Institution shall anticipate all project expenses, which MAECI will reimburse at the end of each year, upon submission of the financial documents and after a positive evaluation of the corresponding scientific report.

Chinese Party:

The maximum funding for Chinese partners is 2,000,000 RMB per project for 3 years. After the proposal is approved, the Chinese PI shall submit a progress report at the end of each year and the final report after the project is completed.

6. CONTACT INFORMATION

For additional information on the present call, applicants can refer to the following contacts:

In Italy

*Office IX - Directorate General for Cultural and
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