

NASCENT Q&A

This document summarizes questions and answers related to the DARPA National Security Economic Theory (NASCENT) program, based on the DARPA-PS-26-14 Program Solicitation (PS) posted to SAM.gov on February 23, 2026.

1. **Is DARPA envisioning a particular order-of-magnitude budget or team scale for Phase 1 and Phase 2 efforts?**

Answer: No.

2. **For the abstract submission on DARPA’s Broad Agency Announcement Tool (BAAT), can the submission be completed directly by the Principal Investigator (PI), or must it be routed through university research administration?**

Answer: DARPA has no preference regarding which specific human submits the abstract.

3. **Is there any flexibility in the eligibility of University Affiliated Research Center (UARC) proposals?**

Answer: Please see Section 4.1, which explicitly states that UARCs are not eligible to propose to this solicitation.

4. **Could you help us understand a bit more concretely “nontraditional defense contractor” in the context of this solicitation?**

Answer: Please see <https://www.darpa.mil/sites/default/files/attachment/2024-12/SBIR-OT-Fact-Sheet-19-Oct-18-1.pdf>.

5. **I believe that there is already a useful coherent methodology for geoeconomics in existence / I believe that I already invented everything that is required for the program to meet its technical objectives, so why are you running this program?**

Answer: If you truly believe that then you should submit an abstract detailing why you have already solved the problems outlined in the NASCENT solicitation. However, *ex-ante*, DARPA does not share your optimism. Existing methodology, such as it is, has existed for many decades without resulting in meaningful change in the manner by which nations (including the United States) engage in economic statecraft; if you did invent the existing theory, that’s not a mark in your favor. Moreover, as detailed in the PS, existing theory is either qualitative or quantitative, but relies on assumptions that do violence to the operational utility of the theory.

6. **I am currently building a startup with several geoeconomic implications. Is it possible to apply to the program in collaboration with a co-founder under one applicant?**

NASCENT Q&A

Answer: Please see Section 4.1. There are no restrictions on teaming arrangements provided the team meets the eligibility requirement of the PS.

7. **We have some technology from a previous DARPA program that DARPA has directed to be protected as controlled unclassified information (CUI). Does this mean we cannot use it on this program?**

Answer: You cannot use CUI technology or data on NASCENT.

8. **Is institutional review board (IRB) / Department of War (DoW)-approved human use work acceptable as part of NASCENT?**

Answer: Yes, but proposers should note the anticipated rapid pace of NASCENT and compare it with the typical pace of IRBs.

9. **How is the funding distributed across Phase 1 and Phase 2?**

Answer: DARPA does not have a value function over funding distribution. Phase 1 is intended to be 1/6 of the length of Phase 2. Budgets across both phases should include proposed travel.

10. **In the context of Section 3.2.7's description of experimental wargaming, does DARPA anticipate that performers should consider how potential solutions should interact with the Testing and Evaluation (T&E) team's wargaming infrastructure, or should the T&E simulation/wargaming aspect lie outside the desired capabilities of proposed solution?**

Answer: Performer-developed theory lies outside of any specific dynamic scenario that is simulated or exercised. In particular, theory will be provided to participants in experimental wargames and executive tabletop exercises before the topics of the wargames / exercises are revealed; it will be up to the participants to decide how best to use the theory. (An analogy is the theory of options pricing under geometric Brownian motion which could be applied in many different financial simulations or wargaming contexts and exists exogenous to the structure of the game.)

11. **Is the program interested in mechanisms that adapt over time as adversaries respond, or is the focus primarily static mechanism design?**

Answer: Both are in-scope.

12. **Are there specific variables excluded from consideration in the ontology / taxonomy / lexicon that will be created by the performers in Phase 1?**

NASCENT Q&A

Answer: No. Proposers should note that the ontology / taxonomy / lexicon is intended to be consistent but not complete and that it will evolve during the course of Phase 2, if Phase 2 commences.

13. **How will DARPA distinguish between large language model (LLM)-generated “slop” and computationally generated content? For example, is formal verification of a computationally conjectured result sufficient, assuming it can be tested and executed by the T&E team? Would DARPA desire/require that the economic intuition underlying the result be independently interpretable by the research team?**

Answer: Constructively, LLM-generated slop is identifiable as such when it is generated by an LLM and when it is slop. The first criterion is self-explanatory. The second criterion is slightly subjective but generally is characterized by a combination of: (a) a thin veneer of professionalism; (b) a lack of technical rigor; and (c) obviousness or irrelevance buried under jargon or difficult-to-parse language. Slop can be – and is frequently – generated by humans, and DARPA severely discourages human-generated slop from being created on NASCENT (or included in proposals!) as well. However, LLM-generated slop is particularly problematic for a program that evaluates the quality of theory (like NASCENT!) because LLMs can generate slop much more quickly than people can, resulting in an overload on the test and evaluation team. Theory that does not meet any of (a), (b), and (c) above is very likely not slop. A good rule of thumb: if you are at all concerned about a research product being considered slop, it is very likely slop.

14. **Given that RAND is currently conducting “strategic competition” projects in the Western Pacific which include significant underlying economic assumptions, how will you ensure their assumption bias will not bias their evaluation of abstracts and proposals?**

Answer: Neither RAND nor MIT Lincoln Lab will be involved in the evaluation of abstracts or proposals.

15. **The PS describes DARPA’s desire to create novel mechanisms. Is exploring quantification of existing mechanisms in scope?**

Answer: Not directly, but quantification of existing mechanisms as a step in a broader process of proposing a generic process of augmenting or replacing existing mechanisms is in scope, interesting, and could be useful.

16. **DARPA’s description of the goal state of NASCENT seems to imply that theory developed under the program is so open that it provides every adversary, or potentially adversarial nation, with the same capacity to use it for aims that are disadvantageous to the United States. NASCENT may solve for the goal of global economic security (via broad adoption of the breakthroughs) but also opens up**

NASCENT Q&A

potential for a failure to prevent technological surprise. How does NASCENT advantage the United States over other nations?

Answer: Free markets and free ideas are central to the U.S. identity and corrosive to the identity of its adversaries, who thrive on state control and deceit. Historical, economic, leadership, and cultural analyses suggest that America's adversaries are not open to creating positive-sum economic outcomes for private-sector entities while creating positive national security externalities at low cost to the state, i.e., they are not open to application of NASCENT theory. Said another way, DARPA strongly believes that even if (when!) NASCENT theory exists and is publicly available, U.S. adversaries will not use it effectively, if at all, because its existence and application serve as a constructive counterpoint to their ideologies.

17. Is the creation of new financial instruments in scope?

Answer: Yes.

18. Though Bellman's principle of optimality is an interesting analogy, even if optimal plans could be computed at scale execution could fail because there could be no economic levers to guarantee that optimal plans are executable. Is addressing this issue in scope?

Answer: Yes. Also, see Q&As 11 and 17.

19. May a performer submit two distinct research concepts under this solicitation, or is submission limited to a single concept per organization?

Answer: One organization may submit an arbitrary number of abstracts. Note that each abstract will be considered on its own merit.

20. If multiple concepts are permitted, should they be submitted as separate abstracts? Additionally, in that case, is it acceptable to repeat the proposer capabilities section within each abstract?

Answer: Each separate research concept should be submitted as a separate, self-contained abstract.

21. What are the policies on non-U.S. citizens performing on the project? Are they eligible to be the principal investigators on subawards, if they work for a U.S. institution?

Answer: Non-U.S. citizens may perform on NASCENT. Specific details of performance will be discussed during contract negotiations if a proposal is successful.

NASCENT Q&A

22. **Can technical papers included in the abstract submission have research associated with named entities to show the feasibility/proof of concept for elements of the NASCENT proposal being submitted?**

Answer: Yes.

23. **Given that Phase 1 involves collaboration among performers to develop a shared ontology, how should ontology fit within the proposed deliverables? Is a complete geoeconomic ontology within a proposal acceptable, additive, or necessary to that collaborative outcome? Or is it assumed that approved proposals will jointly define a complete ontology?**

Answer: Proposers are expected to propose a strategy for developing their own ontology / taxonomy / lexicon per Section 1 of the NASCENT abstract template. Performers may develop their own ontology / taxonomy / lexicon during Phase 1. *Ex ante*, a complete ontology / taxonomy / lexicon would seem necessary as an initial condition for the collaborative dynamics to occur in Phase 1.

24. **What is the anticipated amount of time between hearing back from the abstract and when the full oral proposal / slides should be submitted?**

Answer: DARPA intends to provide at least three weeks between the invitation to proceed to a full proposal and the actual occurrence of that proposal.

25. **Referencing Section 3.1 of the PS -- "NASCENT will test the developed theory by accumulating experimental evidence for or against the hypothesis that such mechanisms would generate the proposed beneficial national security outcomes when implemented in an operational environment." -- are performers expected to collect the experimental evidence for or against their proposed hypothetical mechanisms?**

Answer: DARPA does not require performers to accumulate experimental evidence for or against the referenced hypothesis; NASCENT's test and evaluation team will do that. However, the PS does not preclude a performer conducting additional evaluation to gather additional experimental evidence of efficacy or lack thereof.

26. **Are there US-based universities that the DoW and DARPA will not fund for work on this program?**

Answer: DARPA intends to fund the research that creates the greatest value for the Government.