

Indigenous Communities Diving Deep into Submarines and Other Military Contracts

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A Sea of Opportunity

Canadians may be surprised to learn that English River First Nation is a potential beneficiary of the Royal Canadian Navy's multibillion-dollar procurement of submarines. Located in Northern Saskatchewan, its most proximate major waterbody is Lake Athabasca. Yet, scroll through the partners of Korean submarine manufacturer Hanwha Ocean who are bidding to supply the next generation of Canada's submarine fleet,¹ and you will find [Des Nedhe Group](#), the economic development arm of English River First Nation, alongside well-established Canadian military contractors.²

The English River First Nation is not the only Indigenous community (para)scoping out military contracts. In January of this year, [Membertou First Nation](#) and Horizon Naval Engineering acquired [Genoa Design International](#), one of Canada's leading ship building design and 3D modelling firms. Shortly after announcing the acquisition, Chief Terry Paul of Membertou First Nation stated: "by acquiring Genoa Design we are not only growing a strategic business, but also creating opportunities for innovation and Indigenous participation in a critical sector of the ocean economy."³

In 2024, Glooscap First Nation in Nova Scotia set course to pursue military procurement when it established [Glooscap Defence](#), which later acquired several shipyards with the aim of becoming a leader in the construction of marine assets in Canada.⁴ In the North, Inuit owned [Nasittuq Corporation](#) was quick to detect opportunities for military procurement and has played a critical role in developing Canada's warning system infrastructure since 2001.⁵ In 2022, Nasittuq received a \$592 million contract to operate and maintain the North Warning System, which entails 5000 kilometers of radar sites across Canada's North that detect aircraft and cruise missiles flying overhead.⁶

Diving Deep in the Changing Current

Increased Indigenous participation in military procurement is the result of the Government of Canada's commitment to direct at least 5% of procurement spending to Indigenous businesses, including within defence procurement.⁷

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With \$48 billion allocated between 2026 and 2027 to strengthen and reinforce Canada's military capabilities,⁸ identifying Indigenous companies that can supply the Department of National Defence, directly or in partnership with existing military suppliers, will be essential for meeting the 5% target.

Operating Undetected

The Government of Canada's policy promoting Indigenous procurement represents a significant opportunity for domestic, and international, military suppliers seeking to win contracts to supply the Department of National Defence. However, the economic benefits of the policy for Indigenous communities are still emerging and will need to be assessed over a longer time-horizon. Indigenous governments with already-existing business arms may be best situated to secure partnerships with major military suppliers, as was seen with English River First Nation, while other Indigenous governments may see more limited benefits from the Government of Canada's Indigenous procurement requirements.

It will also take time to assess whether the policy delivers meaningful benefits to Indigenous Canadians, for example through employment, training, apprenticeship and other opportunities, since the terms of the agreements between Indigenous communities and military suppliers are generally confidential.

Giving Das Boot to Old Approaches

The Government of Canada's shifting approach to procurement represents a significant opportunity for both domestic and foreign suppliers to build and leverage meaningful partnerships with Indigenous businesses to improve the competitiveness of their product offerings, including in the growing Canadian defence market. Existing military suppliers have already found opportunities to leverage their relationships with Indigenous governments to enhance bids, secure contracts, acquire targets or even sell parts of their operations. If the Government of Canada follows through on its commitments to expand military spending over the coming years, these opportunities will only increase.

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¹ <https://kss-iii.ca/canadian-partners/>.

² Des Nedhe Group, "Des Nedhe signs MOU with Hanwha Ocean of Korea" (3 November 2023), online: <desnedhe.com/news/des-nedhe-signs-mou-with-hanwha-ocean-of-korea/>.

³ Jessica Roche, "Genoa Design International in Agreement to be Acquired by Membertou First Nation and Horizon Naval Engineering Partnership" (15 January 2026), online: <genoadesign.com/membertou-first-nation-horizon-naval-engineering-partnership/>.

⁴ Glooscap Ventures, "Glooscap First Nation Launches Glooscap Defence, Targets Strategic Maritime Assets" (2 June 2024), online: <<https://www.glooscapventures.ca/post/glooscap-first-nation-launches-glooscap-defence-targets-strategic-maritime-assets>>.

⁵ Nasittuq, "Nasittuq Wins Support Services Contract for Canadian Forces Station Alert" (3 October 2022), online: <nasittuq.com/2022/10/03/nasittuq-wins-cfs-alert-contract/>. See also <https://www.nasittuq.com/projects/north-warning-system/>.

⁶ Nasittuq, "Nasittuq Warning System", online: <nasittuq.com/projects/north-warning-system/>; see also Nasittuq, "Nasittuq Wins 7-Year North Warning System Operations and Maintenance Contract" (31 January 2022), online: <nasittuq.com/2022/01/31/nasittuq-wins-north-warning-system-operations-maintenance-contract/>.

⁷ Government of Canada, "Mandatory minimum 5% Indigenous procurement target" (Last modified 19 December 2025), online: <sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1691786841904/1691786863431>.

⁸ Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, Government of Canada "Minister Ali, President of the Treasury Board, tables the Main Estimates 2026-27 in the House of Commons" online: <canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/news/2026/02/minister-ali-president-of-the-treasury-board-tables-the-main-estimates-2026-27-in-the-house-of-commons.html>.

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