

Canada Plans to Buy 12 Attack Subs in First Order Since the 1990s



HMCS Corner Brook at St. Johns, 2004 (public domain)

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Canada's government has announced plans to buy a dozen diesel-electric submarines capable of operating under the Arctic ice. If completed, the acquisition would triple the size of Canada's small and aging attack-sub fleet, which it acquired used from the Royal Navy in the late 1990s.

In a press conference, Canadian defense minister Bill Blair said that Canada will acquire a "new conventional fleet" of subs to "covertly detect and deter maritime threats," beginning with the 2024 budget. Canada's defense procurement agencies have yet to begin the process of selecting a shipbuilder for the program, and an initial RFP process will be launched in the fall.

The multibillion-dollar cost of the program will boost Canada's defense spending up towards 1.75 percent of GDP by the end of the decade, bringing it within reach of the 2.0 percent target in its obligations to NATO. (The acquisition announcement was timed to coincide with a major NATO summit in Washington, following criticism from

Canada's fellow NATO members over the nation's relatively low defense investments.)

Canada is not a member of the U.S.-UK-Australia "AUKUS" nuclear sub pact, and does not have access to nuclear-propulsion technology, so the program is expected to focus on diesel-electric options - as Blair confirmed.

Canada's current Victoria-class submarines were commissioned into the Royal Navy in 1990-1993, just as the Cold War was coming to an end. They were all decommissioned in 1994, then acquired by the Royal Canadian Navy in 2000-2004. The boats required an extensive refit to restore them to operating order, and one of them (Chicoutimi) partially flooded during underway repairs and caught fire, killing one officer. The episode and aftermath became emblematic of problems with the four-vessel class: Chincoutimi reentered service in 2015, but immediately encountered new problems with weld quality and main battery issues. The four attack subs are aging and are due for a costly life-extension program in order to keep them running into the 2030s, and at present, only one is operational. A replacement series would provide Canada with modern capabilities and reduce the high maintenance costs of life extension.

"This is a significant capability that should have been on the approved list, at least a decade ago," said former navy Commander Retired Vice-Admiral Mark Norman in an interview with Global News, warning that the acquisition could still take a long time. "I'm very concerned about how long it takes us to do these types of things. Our track record is atrocious."