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PERSPECTIVE

Delivering Arctic defence infrastructure at speed:

Why Canada needs a new procurement risk model

Authors: Jordan Eizenga | Kevin Radford | Darren Hawco | Matt Campbell

Canada is entering a new phase of Arctic defence investment, with NORAD modernization, Forward Operating Location upgrades, the Arctic Infrastructure Fund, and Northern Operational Support Hubs all requiring faster infrastructure delivery in the North. But short construction seasons, limited access, constrained labour markets, uncertain site conditions, scarce accommodation, and limited contractor capacity make Arctic risk difficult to price and transfer up front. Those conditions also require a shift from procuring isolated assets to managing northern infrastructure as a connected delivery system, where logistics, materials, accommodations, equipment, and replenishment can be planned across projects.

This white paper argues for a more fit-for-purpose procurement model: keeping fixed-price contracting where risk is manageable, while using staged collaborative delivery for complex northern projects to define scope earlier, reduce uncertainty before construction, and align incentives around cost, schedule, safety, Indigenous participation, and operational readiness.

The strategic imperative

For much of the past two decades, the binding constraint on Arctic defence infrastructure was not execution but authorization: projects struggled to compete for sustained investment in a system optimized to manage scarce funding. That constraint is changing. Canada has moved from Arctic defence ambition to funded delivery commitments. NORAD modernization includes $38.6B over 20 years, with $15.7B[1] identified for infrastructure and support capabilities and early capabilities expected as soon as 2028.[2] More recent commitments include an $816M investment[3] to expand the Canadian Coast Guard's Arctic maritime security role through improved maritime domain awareness, new long-range radar sites, and a year-round Maritime Domain Awareness Hub in Iqaluit.

The federal government has also added major dual-use northern infrastructure commitments. Transport Canada's $1B Arctic Infrastructure Fund[4] is intended to build and expand transportation infrastructure—including roads, rail, airports, bridges, and ports—that can serve both defence and community priorities. The fund is designed to strengthen defence readiness, improve transportation links, support economic development, enhance community connectivity and emergency response, and advance Indigenous reconciliation.

These commitments also highlight the distinct nature of Canada's Arctic delivery challenge. While Canada can learn from other jurisdictions, few comparators face the same combination of geography, remoteness, limited existing infrastructure, dispersed communities, and long supply lines. In that sense, Canada is not simply applying a proven northern infrastructure playbook; it is building one. That makes procurement and delivery design part of the strategic challenge.

DND's Northern Operational Support Hubs program adds another major delivery requirement: a $2.7B investment between 2024 and 2044 to establish a network of hubs and nodes that improve CAF presence, reach, mobility, and responsiveness in the Canadian Arctic and North.[5] Confirmed hub locations include Inuvik, Iqaluit, Resolute, Whitehorse, and Yellowknife, with confirmed nodes in Cambridge Bay and Rankin Inlet. DND describes the hub-and-spoke model to increase CAF presence and responsiveness across a region representing approximately 40 percent of Canada's landmass.

The direction of travel is clear. Canada is no longer debating whether Arctic defence and dual-use infrastructure matter. The question is whether the delivery system can keep pace with the commitments now being made.

That is where the risk lies. If the contracting and procurement model cannot match the operating environment, projects will be announced faster than they can be delivered. Scope will be narrowed to fit fixed budgets, procurements may need to be repeated, and costs will rise through inflation, remobilization, extended overhead, and missed construction windows. Over time, contractors may also come to see Arctic work as commercially unattractive or claims-heavy, further reducing competition in an already thin market.

For defence infrastructure, delay is not just a cost issue. It is a capability issue. A runway, port, radar-support site, logistics hub, fuel facility, or support node that remains in procurement is not yet contributing to sovereignty, readiness, or deterrence. In addition, typical multi-stepped procurement process executed in series add years to the schedule which inflates project budgets beyond projections. Canada's Arctic defence challenge is therefore not only whether the country can fund the right projects, but whether it can structure delivery in a way that turns commitments into operational infrastructure at the pace required.

Why projects in the Arctic are different

Arctic infrastructure projects are not simply southern infrastructure projects delivered farther north. They operate under a different delivery reality.

Access is constrained. Many sites depend on limited air, marine, winter road, or seasonal sealift access. Materials, fuel, equipment, temporary accommodation, and specialized labour often need to be mobilized months in advance. Once the season begins, there may be limited ability to recover from errors, missing materials, delayed approvals, or late design changes.

The construction window is short (often 3–4 months).[6] A delay that would be manageable in southern Canada can push Arctic work into the next season, triggering remobilization, cost escalation, idle resources, and lost operational time.[7]

Site conditions are difficult to resolve before procurement. Permafrost, drainage, coastal conditions, contamination, limited geotechnical information, local aggregate availability, borrow sources, and access-road requirements and climate-related changes can materially affect design, sequencing, and cost. Even basic assumptions—such as whether suitable gravel or rock is available nearby, or whether additional roadwork is needed to reach it—can change the construction plan and cost profile. In remote locations, major equipment may also need to be mobilized early and then sit idle if surveys, approvals, materials, or access works do not align. Some of these risks are genuinely hard to know at the procurement stage without further investigation, causing uncertainty which adds time and costs.

Labour and contractor capacity are thin.[8] Northern work requires specialized experience and the ability to manage logistics, supply chains, safety, accommodation, equipment, and community relationships in remote environments. The pool of firms willing and able to do this work is limited. That pool can become even thinner if the commercial model asks contractors to accept risks they cannot control.

Indigenous partnership is critical to delivery. Indigenous governments and development organizations are not peripheral stakeholders. They are rights holders, land and access partners, sources of local knowledge, potential business and workforce partners, and essential participants in decisions about infrastructure that may affect northern communities for decades. DND's NOSH program explicitly commits to distinctions-based engagement and collaboration with Indigenous governments and organizations, grounded in reconciliation, Indigenous rights, governance systems, and community benefits.

Project interdependencies are high. A northern defence facility may depend on enabling investments in roads, ports, runways, power, communications, housing, warehousing, medical capacity, and emergency services. Treating each project as a standalone procurement can miss the fact that Arctic defence capability often depends on a connected system of dual-use infrastructure.

These conditions do not make Arctic projects undeliverable. They do mean that procurement models designed around high certainty at the proposal stage can create false confidence, particularly if corresponding contracts follow precedents that have caused significant litigation mostly caused by events not known or forecasted during the procurement. They also point to a broader delivery question: whether Canada should continue moving equipment, materials, and supplies project by project from southern ports and depots, or develop a more integrated northern logistics model with pre-positioned equipment, materials, commodities, and replenishment capacity. The more uncertain the environment, the more important it becomes to reduce uncertainty before locking in price, schedule, and scope.

The fixed-price model trap

Fixed-price contracting is not inherently flawed. In stable delivery environments with a stable inflation environment and limited exposure to unknown conditions, it can support cost discipline, simplify approvals, and give government a clear basis for comparing bids.

Where significant uncertainty exists, it becomes inefficient when used to transfer risks that bidders cannot reasonably investigate, control, or price. The result is a set of complex contract terms that create ambiguous terms related to compensation for 'unforeseen events' (and what constitutes an 'unforeseen event'), technical reviews by government agencies, risks related to approval timelines, and circular dispute resolution procedures have proven to be challenging to administer contributing to claims and litigation. Fixed price contracts also require significant collateral from contractors to anchor risk allocation which creates higher risk contingencies and/or contract ambiguity to address responsibility when risk events occur. In practice, this can create complex contract terms around unforeseen events, approval timelines, technical reviews, compensation events, and dispute resolution. Those terms can be difficult to administer and may still result in claims, exclusions, or litigation when risks materialize. Over time, repeated exposure to unmanageable risk can reduce contractor appetite for fixed-price procurements, particularly in remote or high-uncertainty environments.

That is the core issue in Arctic delivery. In a conventional fixed-price process, government tries to create certainty before going to market. Requirements are defined, bidders are asked to commit to a price and schedule, and risk is transferred through contract terms. That model works best when site conditions are understood, supply chains are reliable, labour is available, and contractors can control the main variables affecting cost and schedule.

In the Arctic, those assumptions often do not hold. Bidders may be asked to price uncertain ground conditions, limited access windows, long logistics chains, immature project scopes, scarce labour, limited accommodation, and evolving operational requirements. When the risk is too large or too poorly defined, contractors have only a few rational choices: add large contingencies, seek contract terms that pin the bid price to what was known at the procurement stage, submit a low bid and recover through change orders, narrow the scope, or decline to bid.[9]

Nanisivik is a cautionary example. The facility was announced as a High Arctic docking and refuelling asset to support the Royal Canadian Navy's Arctic operations, but the project was later narrowed to stay within a fixed budget envelope of approximately $130M.[10] DND's own backgrounder notes that the scope was reduced to keep the project on budget after further analysis of the site and costs. Years later, the Auditor General found that the resulting facility would be of much more limited use than originally expected, with an operating period of about four weeks per year because the scoped-down design did not include heated fuel tanks. In May 2026, DND announced that it had begun transitioning the Nanisivik Naval Facility out of operational use after changes in operational needs and facility viability. The point is not to relitigate Nanisivik. It is to show what can happen when Arctic uncertainty is compressed into a fixed budget too early: the project may remain defensible on paper, while the delivered capability becomes smaller, later, and less useful than intended.

The result is the opposite of what fixed-price contracting is meant to achieve. Government may appear to have price certainty at contract award, but the project still carries the same underlying uncertainty. The difference is that the uncertainty is now hidden inside contingency, exclusions, claims, schedule slippage, or reduced capability.

The issue, then, is not whether government or contractors should "take the risk." The issue is whether the risk has been defined well enough to allocate it intelligently. In Arctic delivery, government should not pretend that all uncertainty can be transferred at the RFP stage. It should hold that uncertainty long enough to investigate it, price it transparently, and then allocate each risk to the party best able to manage it.

Put plainly: do not pay contractors to guess at risks no one understands yet. Use the early project phase to turn unknowns into manageable risks, then allocate them to the party best able to control them.

What should replace it?

The better model is a staged collaborative delivery approach. It gives government earlier access to the market, better cost information, and more control before it commits to full construction. The model would work in three broad stages.

Stage 1: Select the right team before locking in the price

Government would use a qualification-based process to select a preferred contractor or small group of delivery partners based on northern experience, technical capability, logistics expertise, Indigenous partnership approach, security requirements, safety record, project controls, and team quality. Price would still matter, but the first decision would be about who can help government deliver the project — not who is willing to guess the lowest number.

Stage 2: Fund a development phase to define the project properly.

The selected team would work with DND, DCC, PSPC, Indigenous partners, designers, engineers, cost advisors, and relevant federal or territorial partners to validate scope, investigate site conditions, test construction methods, assess logistics, refine schedule, and build a credible cost estimate. This is where uncertainty is reduced before it becomes a claim, contingency, or failed construction season.

The development phase should also look beyond the individual asset and test program-level efficiencies: pre-positioning common materials and commodities in northern supply hubs, consolidating transportation, and using repeatable designs for common facility types such as warehouses, accommodations, offices, mess halls, refrigeration, and support buildings. It should distinguish between risks that can be reduced, risks that can be priced and allocated, and risks that remain inherently uncertain. Contractors should provide practical advice on constructability, sequencing, logistics, means and methods, and cost, while government retains independent assurance and the decision authority to proceed, redesign, repackage, or pause before full construction commitment.

Stage 3: Align incentives, then move into transparent delivery.

Once the project is sufficiently defined, government would approve a target cost and delivery plan. The construction phase would then proceed with shared incentives: if the team beats the agreed target while meeting safety, quality, schedule, Indigenous participation, and operational requirements, it shares in the upside. If performance falls short, it shares in the downside.

Commercially, this is a transparent target-cost model. The project team builds the budget openly, government can see the assumptions behind the numbers, independent advisors test whether the estimate is reasonable, and contractors are paid against defined allowable costs rather than a black-box lump sum. The result is not an open cheque book; it is a more visible and governable basis for deciding whether to proceed.

A practical example could be a northern airfield, logistics hub, port, or radar-support project where site, access, and sequencing risks are too significant to price responsibly at the outset. Instead of asking bidders to lock in a fixed price before the ground conditions, logistics plan, and Indigenous participation model are fully understood, government would select a capable team, fund a short development phase, agree on a target cost, and proceed only once the project is sufficiently defined and independently assured.

The value of this approach is that it replaces false certainty with controlled transparency. Government sees the cost build-up, assumptions, risks, trade-offs, and schedule logic before making the full construction commitment.

A collaborative risk allocation model

The lesson is not that government should take on more risk. The lesson is that government should stop paying others to pretend uncertainty has been transferred when it has not. Even with strong front-end diligence, the final cost of complex Arctic projects may not be fully known until construction is complete. The objective is not to eliminate uncertainty, but to make it visible earlier, reduce it where possible, and govern the remaining risk transparently.

A more disciplined model would separate risks that are structurally difficult to price at bid time from risks the contractor can and should control. Government should retain or share early-stage uncertainty where the facts are not yet known, while preserving strong contractor accountability for safety, quality, productivity, means and methods, and execution performance.

Risk category	Where risk often lies today	Where risk should shift
Unknown site and ground conditions	Pushed to bidders through fixed-price assumptions or broad contract language	Retained by government during development, then allocated once investigated
Government agency approvals	Often embedded in fixed completion dates or contractor schedule risk	Government-led coordination through a single accountable approvals pathway, reflected transparently in the target schedule
Project controls	Often reliant on contractor reporting systems	Owner-level visibility into cost, schedule, risk, and progress through integrated reporting and data standards
Quality Assurance and controls	Typically relies on contractor process and government review procedures	Contractor for technical requirement to ensure quality control of its means and methods, and Government for quality assurance processes for overall quality outcome
Access and logistics	Often priced by contractors as contingency	Shared between government and delivery partner
Scope uncertainty and evolving operational requirements	Often transferred indirectly, then managed through change orders	Retained by government until requirements are stable
Indigenous partnership	Often treated as engagement outside the core delivery model	Joint governance with Indigenous partners embedded early
Market capacity	Often treated as a bidder problem	Shared through early market engagement and pipeline planning
Labour productivity	Contractor-owned after assumptions are validated	Contractor-owned, with transparent assumptions
Worker accommodation and site services	Often embedded in bidder contingency	Shared during development, then allocated through the delivery plan
Safety and quality	Contractor-owned	Contractor-owned. No change.
Cost escalation before full definition	Often embedded in bid premiums	Shared or retained during development, then governed through target cost and escalation rules
Poor execution performance	Managed through claims or contract remedies after problems emerge	Contractor-exposed through pain/gain and performance incentives
Owner-driven delay	Often becomes disputed delay or claim	Government-owned
Design maturity risk	Often pushed to bidders before design is ready	Shared during development, then allocated through stage gates
Security and controlled-access	Often identified late or treated as compliance risk	Defined by government early, with contractor compliance built into selection and delivery planning

How accountability is preserved

The most predictable objection to collaborative delivery is that it sounds like government is weakening cost control. That concern should be taken seriously. Arctic procurement reform will not succeed if it appears to reduce discipline, weaken competition, or give contractors an open cheque book.

But a properly designed collaborative model is not open-ended reimbursement. It is a controlled delivery model built around transparency, independent assurance, and performance incentives.

Control mechanism	How it protects public accountability
Transparent cost build-up	Government can see the actual assumptions behind the budget instead of relying on a black-box lump sum
Defined allowable costs	Only agreed categories of cost are reimbursable through cost control procedures established by the Government and enabled through technology
Independent estimating	Target costs are tested by a third party before approval
Audit rights	Government can verify actual costs and claims
Stage gates	Government can stop, redesign, defer, or proceed before full construction commitment
Pain/gain sharing	Contractors are rewarded for beating target cost and exposed if performance falls short
Non-cost performance metrics	Incentives are tied to safety, schedule, quality, Indigenous participation, and operational outcomes, not just spending
Shared risk register	Key risks are tracked, priced, assigned, and updated throughout delivery
Real-time decision authority	Project-level governance can resolve delivery issues before they become season-ending delays
Senior oversight board	DND, DCC, PSPC, Treasury Board, Indigenous partners, and delivery partners have a structured forum for material decisions

This is more accountable than forcing a fixed price before the project is understood. A conventional lump-sum contract may look disciplined at award, but it can hide uncertainty in contingency, exclusions, claims, and schedule delay. A collaborative model makes that uncertainty visible earlier, gives government better information, and creates decision points before irreversible commitments are made.

Speed also creates value. In Arctic defence infrastructure, every missed construction season can mean remobilization costs, inflation exposure, extended overhead, delayed community benefits, and slower military readiness. Moving faster is not only about urgency. It can reduce whole-of-project cost, preserve contractor interest, improve market confidence, and bring operational capability online sooner.

What Government gets in return

A collaborative delivery model gives government four things conventional fixed-price procurement often struggles to provide in Arctic conditions: speed, cost confidence, contractor commitment, and accountability.

1. The first return is **speed.** Projects can move to market before every scope detail is locked down, because the early phase is designed to define the project with the people who will help deliver it. That matters in the Arctic, where missing a construction season can mean losing a year. Early contractor and Indigenous partner involvement can identify access constraints, site risks, labour needs, accommodation requirements, logistics bottlenecks, and sequencing issues before they become schedule failures.

2. The second return is **cost confidence**. A cost estimate developed through site investigation, constructability review, logistics planning, and transparent cost validation is more useful than a fixed-price bid built on incomplete information. Government still gets cost discipline, but it is based on visible assumptions rather than hidden contingency.

3. The third return is **contractor commitment**. Firms are more likely to bring their strongest teams to projects where the commercial model is credible and the risks are manageable. In a thin northern market, this matters. A procurement model that asks contractors to carry unpriceable Arctic risk can reduce competition before the project begins. This creates a culture of collaboration for the parties to focus on outcome of the project and reduces the risk of unproductive and time-consuming litigation.

4. The fourth return is **accountability**. Shared incentives align the owner, contractor, designers, and delivery partners around cost, schedule, safety, quality, Indigenous participation, and operational outcomes. The model does not remove contractor accountability; it focuses accountability on the things contractors can actually control.

Over time, the model also helps build a more capable Arctic delivery ecosystem. If Canada expects to deliver multiple northern defence and dual-use infrastructure projects over the next two decades, each project should not start from zero.

A federal reform window is opening

This shift would not occur in isolation. The Government of Canada has already signalled that major project delivery needs to become faster, more predictable, and better coordinated. In May 2026, the federal government released Getting Major Projects Built in Canada. In June 2026, it also initiated the process to consider the Mackenzie Valley Highway, Grays Bay Road and Port, and the NWMO Deep Geological Repository for potential listing as projects of national interest under the Building Canada Act, a discussion paper on proposed legislative, regulatory, and policy reforms. The paper responds to the 2025 Speech from the Throne commitment to make decisions on major projects within two years and identifies long-standing barriers to delivery, including duplication, poor coordination between departments, overlapping consultation processes, and uncertainty for project proponents.

Several proposals are directly relevant to Arctic defence infrastructure: concurrent assessment and permitting, a Federal Review Coordinator, a Crown Consultation Hub, one coordinated consultation process for major projects, and, for certain projects, a single federal decision document. These reforms are aimed primarily at approvals and decision-making, but the same logic should extend into procurement. Faster approvals will not deliver Arctic infrastructure if projects then enter a procurement model that misallocates risk, discourages bidders, or forces premature fixed pricing.

Arctic defence infrastructure should therefore be treated as a test case for end-to-end delivery reform: faster decisions, coordinated consultation, clear project authority, fit-for-purpose procurement, and disciplined delivery governance. The goal is not just to approve projects faster. It is to build them faster, with better information, stronger accountability, and a delivery model suited to northern conditions.

Recommendations

Canada should use one controlled pilot — potentially aligned with a northern project moving through the Major Projects Office or Building Canada Act process where there is a clear dual-use defence requirement — to test the model, prove the guardrails, and create a repeatable pathway for Arctic defence infrastructure delivery.

1. Pilot the model on one near-term Arctic defence project

Select one bounded project where the case for speed is strong, the delivery risks are real, and the scope is manageable. Good candidates could include a Forward Operating Location upgrade, northern airfield or runway improvement, radar-support site, Northern Operational Support Hub or Node, logistics facility, or dual-use transportation asset.

The pilot should test the full model: capability-based selection, a funded development phase, transparent target-cost pricing, independent cost assurance, shared incentives, audit rights, Indigenous partnership, and stop/go stage gates. Port of Churchill-related infrastructure could be considered only if partners identify a clear dual-use defence and community requirement.

2. Create a policy pathway for northern defence procurement

Treasury Board, PSPC, DND, DCC, and, where applicable, the Major Projects Office should create a clear pathway that permits non-fixed-price delivery models where Arctic risk cannot be responsibly priced at the RFP stage.

The pathway should define when the model can be used and what guardrails are required, including transparent costing, independent assurance, audit rights, defined allowable costs, shared pain/gain incentives, Indigenous partnership expectations, and project-level governance.

3. Build the owner capability to govern it

DND and DCC need the capability to manage collaborative delivery as informed owners. That means having access to the right commercial, technical, cost, schedule, logistics, Indigenous engagement, and project controls expertise. The focus should be on commercial outcomes and program management of people and processes using the best available technology.

It also means giving project teams enough delegated authority to make timely decisions. In the Arctic, slow decisions can mean missed sealift windows, lost construction seasons, and delayed capability.

Conclusion

Canada cannot afford to apply southern procurement logic to northern realities. In the Arctic, speed is sovereignty: infrastructure that is delayed, narrowed in scope, or trapped in procurement is capability that is not available when it is needed. The issue is not whether Canada can announce the right projects, but whether it can deliver them in a region where access is limited, construction seasons are short, local capacity is constrained, and uncertainty cannot be fully priced before work begins.

A collaborative, risk-sharing model is not a departure from discipline. It is what discipline requires when the cost of pretending risk has been transferred is measured in contingencies, claims, fewer bidders, reduced scope, and lost time. Delivering Arctic defence infrastructure at the pace this moment demands will require government to bring uncertainty into the open earlier, align risk with the parties best able to manage it, and govern delivery with transparency, speed, and accountability. That is the credible path to turning Arctic defence commitments into operational capability.

Endnotes

1. Fact sheet: Funding for Continental Defence and NORAD Modernization - Canada.ca
2. NORAD modernization project timelines - Canada.ca
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Contact us

Jordan Eizenga
Partner,
Infrastructure & Real Estate
Deloitte Canada
jeizenga@deloitte.ca

Kevin Radford
Partner,
Infrastructure & Real Estate
Deloitte Canada
keradford@deloitte.ca

Matt Campbell
Senior Manager,
Infrastructure & Real Estate
Deloitte Canada
mattcampbell@deloitte.ca

Darren Hawco
Senior Advisor,
Infrastructure & Real Estate
Deloitte Canada
dhawco@deloitte.ca

Deloitte.

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