

EU's first associate member?

How to make EU-Canada ties stronger, tighter




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O P I N I O N

During her State of the Union (SOTEU) speech in Strasbourg, Commission President von der Leyen addressed Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, the first foreign head of government to attend the event. She proposed that Canada become the EU's first 'associate member'. The announcement reflected the strengthening political ties between Ottawa and Brussels.

Yet several obstacles stand in the way of Canada's closer integration with the EU. To turn the announcement into an enduring reality, the EU and its Member States should set out a clear political vision of what associate membership would entail. At the same time, they must sustain the deepening partnership with Canada through concrete action on economic security, energy, defence, and other areas.

A 'unique alliance' in the making

The case for closer ties between Ottawa and Brussels is straightforward. Canada is a NATO ally and shares Europe's values. European countries and Canada face common threats from Russia along their eastern and northern frontiers — as well as increasing economic pressure from China. Like the EU, Canada's relationship with the US has become strained under Trump 2.0: Washington and Ottawa are currently in an escalating tariff war, and the US president has repeatedly threatened to turn Canada into the 51st US state.

In light of growing threats and less reliable American support, Canada, the EU and individual European countries have stepped up the pace of their co-operation. They have signed over 30 agreements since January 2025. Canada has become an EU Security and Defence Partner, and the first non-European country whose companies can benefit from SAFE loans beyond the 35% threshold. Ottawa has enhanced defence cooperation with the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, the UK and Ukraine. In July 2026, Canada selected Germany's TKMS as preferred supplier for delivering Canada's next fleet of

submarines, its largest-ever defence procurement contract. Carney has pitched Canada as a key partner for the EU's economic security. The country's vast reserves of energy and critical minerals could help Europe tackle rising energy prices and reduce its dependence on hostile actors. In May, Germany secured a 20-year supply agreement for Canadian LNG, although it will take years for Canada to build up the necessary export capacity and infrastructure. Recent agreements between Ottawa and Brussels also cover critical emerging sectors, such as artificial intelligence, cyber and space.

What model to follow?

The idea of an 'associate membership' status — which does not currently exist — raises numerous questions about what this arrangement would involve, and whether EU Member States and Canada would both want it.


Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney (c) announces that Canada has picked Germany's TKMS to build 12 submarines for its navy, at HMC Dockyard in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, on July 6, 2026.
● INGRID BULMER/REUTERS


Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney (front) and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (c-r) arrive for the annual State of the European Union at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, eastern France, on September 16, 2026.
● PASCAL BASTIEN/AP

ist — raises numerous questions about what this arrangement would involve, and whether EU Member States and Canada would both want it. Contemplating full membership would require amending the EU treaties to consider Canada part of geographical Europe. This is unlikely to happen. It would also cause uproar among EU candidate countries concerned about being leapfrogged in the accession process.

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Each of these options presents political difficulties for Ottawa. Canada would need to change its laws and regulations to align with the EU *acquis*, and substantially reduce its integration within the North American economy. While Ottawa is diversifying away from Washington, it still exports 75% of its goods to its southern neighbour, while the EU accounts for less than 6% of Canadian exports. These changes could complicate economic and political stability, potentially fuelling secessionist pressures in a country that is already facing a (non-binding) referendum in the province of Alberta in October.

On the European side, there also seems to be a limit to the appetite for closer ties. Ten Member States — many of which face elections in 2027 — still need to ratify the Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement (CETA) which was signed in 2017. Before the SOTEU speech, several European diplomats expressed reservations about Carney's proposals.

Raising the ceiling

The upcoming EU-Canada summit, scheduled to take place at the end of October in Montreal, provides a key opportunity for EU and Canadian leaders. They will need to set out concrete proposals for turning the idea of associate membership into reality.

This could take the form of an association agreement that would elevate the relationship and reflect the expansion of EU-Canada joint interests, going well beyond free trade. It could cover foreign policy coordination, defence, economic security, technology, energy, and democratic resilience. This agreement could become the new standard for EU partnerships with like-minded democracies beyond the European continent, like Japan or Korea.

Beyond the political level, the EU and Member States should continue to strengthen ties with Canada where possible. Provisions that will not apply until CETA is ratified, such as investment protection, could be explored in separate investment agreements. Following the precedent set by SAFE, Canadian companies could be granted privileged access to European procurement in key sectors. This could be particularly attractive to Ottawa given the recent move by the US to ban Canadian goods from federal civil procurement. Such measures could help increase the capital needed across both sides of the Atlantic for the development of AI and energy infrastructure, as well as trusted supply chains for critical raw materials.

On security and defence, Europeans and Canadians could deepen cooperation further. In addition to expanding exercises on Europe's eastern flank — where Canada leads a NATO multinational battalion in Latvia and runs a training mission for Ukraine — they could step up joint activities in the Arctic. The EU's upcoming Arctic Strategy could provide opportunities for joint action with Ottawa across domains such as energy, climate security and critical infrastructure protection. NATO's Arctic Sentry mission and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), which Canada has just applied to join, are other useful frameworks for cooperation. Additionally, joint EU-Canadian missions could patrol the North Atlantic and Arctic waters, ensuring protection of critical undersea infrastructure and key naval routes.

The momentum is there for Europe and Canada to take their partnership to a new level. A political agreement shaping the vision for 'associate membership' status, together with stronger sectoral cooperation, could enable them to do just that.

The article was first published by the EU Institute for Security Studies.

