



By: TA | AP Insight

# Are the EU and Canada staying on track for 'associate membership'?



Prime Minister Mark Carney called Canada “the most European of non-European countries” early in U.S. President Donald Trump’s trade war.

Now, he’s hosting European leaders to pursue an unprecedented alliance, but the proposed EU “**associate member**” designation faces resistance even as the EU’s top official champions it.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President António Costa are in Montreal for a two-day summit aimed at deepening trade, defense and economic ties as Canada and Europe seek to **reduce their dependence on Washington** in a changing world order.

Speaking in Montreal on Thursday, von der Leyen warned that economic relationships once considered sources of stability were increasingly being used as instruments of pressure.

Without naming Trump, she described the consequences for ordinary families and warned that national sovereignty was under threat.

“When trade becomes a tool of economic pressure, it is families that pay the price, from the supermarket shelf to the cost of a new car,” von der Leyen said. “We are seeing in real time our sovereignty being attacked.”

She warned that dependence on a single supplier for energy, semiconductors or critical minerals could be exploited and said countries faced a choice between acting alone or working with trusted partners to protect their economic security.

Trump has suggested Canada’s proposed EU arrangement could be a “hostile act” and threatened tariffs on Europe if he considered it unfriendly.

Asked Wednesday about possible retaliation, a senior Canadian government official told reporters the closer relationship was not directed against the United States but

reflected longstanding shared interests.

The summit puts Carney’s vision for a new global order to the test.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January, **he warned** that the U.S.-led international order was breaking down and urged middle powers to unite against economic coercion.

## Von der Leyen stands by her plan for Canada's new status

The structure and even the name of the **proposed partnership** remain unsettled, with some EU member states questioning the “**associate member**” designation proposed last month by von der Leyen.

Despite resistance from EU member states, von der Leyen showed no sign of abandoning the idea.

**Von der Leyen described the proposed relationship as an “association without accession”**

“Canada cannot become a full-fledged member of the EU because of geography, but we both want to bring our relationship to the highest level possible,” she said. “This is why we are discussing the idea of Canada becoming the first associate member of the European Union.”

Von der Leyen described the proposed relationship as an “association without accession,” saying it could bring Canada closer to EU membership than any previous arrangement with a country outside the bloc.

She said the arrangement would deepen cooperation on everything from artificial intelligence and energy to defense and trade.

Anand Sundar, a special adviser at the European Council on Foreign Relations, said France and Germany are among the countries

unhappy with the designation and that it may not survive the summit.

“The fact that member states have rejected the associate membership framing is very embarrassing for von der Leyen,” Sundar said.

## More talks ahead, Carney said

Carney said Tuesday the summit would be followed by further negotiations over the next year.

“It doesn’t matter about specific names or nomenclature,” Carney said. “What matters is the difference that it will make to lives of Canadians.”

### Carney has ruled out formally joining the EU

Carney said the partnership could create new opportunities for Canadian students, businesses and researchers while strengthening the country’s independence and sovereignty.

Carney has ruled out formally joining the EU, saying any enhanced partnership would require approval by Canada’s Parliament.

## An alliance without membership

The summit is expected to launch an “Alliance for the Future,” a framework for closer cooperation on trade, defense, critical minerals, technology and research.

Von der Leyen said Canada and the EU would finalize an agreement Friday giving Canadian companies, startups and researchers access to Europe’s network of 12 advanced supercomputers, strengthening cooperation on artificial intelligence.

She also announced plans to strengthen strategic supply chains and encourage joint investment in industries critical to economic

security.

### European commissioners and Canadian Cabinet ministers will hold sector-specific meetings

The partnership could expand opportunities for Canadian students and researchers through the EU’s Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe programs and make it easier for professionals to work on both sides of the Atlantic.

European commissioners and Canadian Cabinet ministers will hold sector-specific meetings, beginning with a business forum Thursday before formal leaders’ talks Friday.

Officials hope to develop the broader partnership for possible endorsement in 2027.

## A changing world order reshapes economic and defense ties

Canada is the only non-European country participating in the EU’s 150-billion-euro (\$167-billion) **SAFE defense procurement program**, allowing Canadian companies to take part in joint European military purchases.

But deeper defense cooperation faces obstacles.

Sundar said France is pushing for strict “Made in Europe” rules that could limit Canadian companies’ access to future EU defense spending, while Germany favors broader participation.

He said negotiations over the EU’s next seven-year budget could prove more consequential for Canada than anything announced in Montreal.



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The two sides already have a sweeping free trade agreement, known as CETA, that eliminated most tariffs.

Most provisions have been in force since 2017, although some EU member states have yet to ratify it.

The United States accounted for 71.7% of Canada's merchandise exports in 2025. Carney wants to double exports to other countries over the next decade.

Canada and the EU are seeking closer cooperation on critical minerals as both sides work to diversify supply chains.

Von der Leyen said the value of EU imports of Canadian critical raw materials rose 62% last year to 3.3 billion euros (C\$5.18 billion), including lithium, cobalt, nickel and graphite.

Tobias Gehrke, a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, said the disagreement over terminology was unlikely to derail closer cooperation.

"There is no magic shortcut to rapidly reducing Europe's and Canada's reliance on the U.S. economy and military — not least since Washington might retaliate," Gehrke said. "But the political window is now wide open to take a much bigger step than was previously conceivable."