

Canada and Europe Consider a Closer Alliance

A new EU proposal could pull Canada nearer to Europe, but it also risks angering the United States.



A partly built bridge crosses water between a snowy coast and a distant city, symbolizing a proposed Canada-Europe partnership.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen proposed Wednesday that Canada become the European Union's first **associate** member, according to Associated Press reporting published by PBS NewsHour. The idea is unusual because Canada is not in Europe and because the European Union, or EU, has never had an "associate member" before. That means there is no clear rulebook yet for what rights Canada would gain, what duties it would accept, or how the arrangement would be approved.

The proposal matters because it is about more than trade. It is a sign that Canada is trying to reduce its **dependence** on the United States, and that Europe is trying to build stronger partnerships with countries that share some of its political and economic goals. But it also raises a difficult question: can Canada move closer to Europe without damaging its relationship with its largest neighbor and trading partner?

The backdrop is tension with the United States. President Donald Trump has threatened **tariffs**, which are taxes on imported goods, against the EU if he decides the Canada proposal is meant as a hostile move. Speaking in Charlotte, North Carolina, Trump called the idea of Canada joining the EU laughable and described Canada as a terrible

trade partner. He also suggested the United States could cut off trade with Europe in some areas.

For Canada, the pressure is obvious. The United States is the destination for roughly 70% of Canadian **exports**, according to the AP report. That level of dependence can be useful when relations are smooth, because it gives Canadian companies access to a huge nearby market. It can also be risky when relations sour, because a tariff or trade threat from Washington can hit Canada quickly and hard. Prime Minister Mark Carney has called for a unique **alliance** with the EU, and his office welcomed von der Leyen's proposal as a way to strengthen Canadian sovereignty.

Sovereignty means a country's ability to govern itself and make its own decisions. That word is at the center of the debate. Canadian officials say they do not want full EU membership, because that could require Canada to give up some decision-making power to European institutions. Jonathan Wilkinson, Canada's ambassador-designate to the EU, said Ottawa wants to get as close as possible to the bloc in a way that strengthens Canadian sovereignty rather than weakens it.

The EU is a political and economic union of 27 countries that share some laws, regulations, and institutions. Its executive branch is the European

Commission, which von der Leyen leads. Its elected legislature is the European Parliament, where Carney received a standing ovation and was due to speak Thursday. For all steps toward EU membership, approval currently must be **unanimous** among the 27 member countries. But because associate membership has never existed, it is unclear whether the same process would apply or how long it would take.

Canada and the EU already have a free trade agreement called CETA, which is designed to reduce **barriers** between their economies. Von der Leyen proposed building beyond that with a broader Alliance for the Future, covering advanced manufacturing, technology, defense production, the Arctic, energy, critical **minerals**, **batteries**, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cybersecurity, and economic security. Critical minerals are raw materials, such as certain metals, that are important for modern technology and defense equipment. Cybersecurity means protecting computer systems and networks from attacks.

One possible part of the relationship would be easier movement for people. A Canadian official familiar with the discussions told the AP that Ottawa was exploring an arrangement short of full membership that could allow Canadians to live and work in Europe without visas. A visa is official permission to enter or stay in another country for a specific purpose. Such a change could create opportunities for workers, students, and businesses, but it would also require governments to decide who qualifies and under what conditions.

Defense is already part of the shift. Canada this year became the first non-European country to join the EU's SAFE defense program, a 150-billion-euro,

or \$173-billion, effort that gives Canadian companies access to joint procurement. Joint procurement means governments buy equipment together, which can lower costs and coordinate military planning. Europe has been trying to increase its defense readiness, and Canada's participation suggests the relationship is already moving beyond ordinary trade.

Supporters frame the proposal as a partnership among democratic allies at a time when global politics are less predictable. Some European leaders argue that the EU can become a gathering point for "middle powers," meaning influential countries that are not superpowers but still matter in world affairs. In that view, closer Canada-EU ties could give both sides more options and make them less vulnerable to pressure from any one larger power.

Critics, or at least skeptics, may ask whether the plan is realistic. The proposal does not yet define what associate membership would actually mean. It is not clear who would have to approve it, how disputes would be handled, or whether Canadians and Europeans would accept the practical effects. The United States' reaction also matters. Canada may want more independence, but it cannot easily ignore a neighbor that buys most of its exports.

That is the central tension: Canada and Europe see a chance to build a stronger relationship, but every step toward that goal could create new complications. A closer alliance might make Canada less dependent on Washington and give Europe a stronger partner. It might also provoke trade fights, blur the meaning of EU membership, and force Canada to balance sovereignty against the benefits of belonging more closely to a larger bloc.

Written from reporting by PBS NewsHour.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. If Canada wants to reduce its dependence on the United States, how much economic risk should it be willing to accept in order to build closer ties with Europe?

2. Should an organization like the European Union create special partnership categories for countries outside its region, or would that make the meaning of membership too unclear?

3. When one country's closer relationship with a new partner angers an old partner, who is responsible for keeping the conflict from escalating?

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O A E B R I G S A E I P R V E R S S
T I E S A A T D T N S H Y K E D P M
M D T N E T E E E R A T N A S N P N
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E R U N S Z Y E B E I R I N I F E U
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U S X O B W S R N T P T E N E R I D
F T S E G N A F F P P C A A E M L M

ALLIANCE

ASSOCIATE

BARRIERS

BATTERIES

DEPENDENCE

EXPORTS

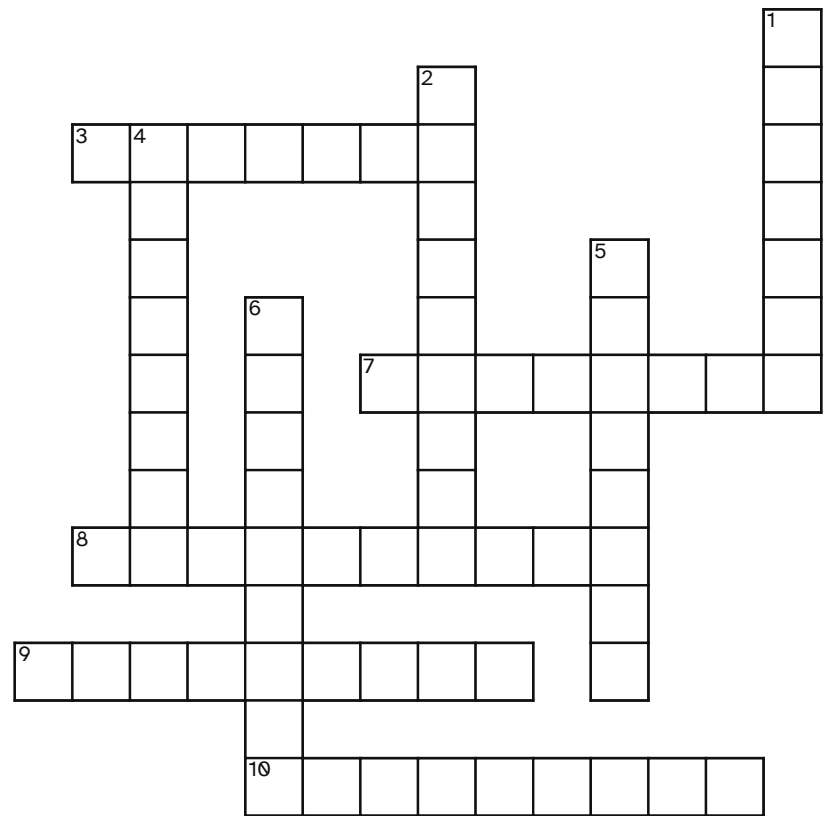
MINERALS

SOVEREIGN

TARIFFS

UNANIMOUS

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ACROSS

- 3 Taxes on goods brought in from other countries
- 7 Natural materials from Earth used to make products
- 8 Heavy reliance on another country for key needs
- 9 Supported by every person involved
- 10 Self-governing and free to make its own decisions

DOWN

- 1 Goods or services sold to buyers abroad
- 2 Linked to a group without being a full member
- 4 Partnership formed to pursue shared goals
- 5 Obstacles that make trade or travel harder
- 6 Energy-storing sources of electrical power

Where this came from

This article was written for 3andB from the reporting below. It is not a reprint — the wording is ours and the facts are theirs.

PBS NewsHour

“EU chief Ursula von der Leyen proposes Canada becoming the bloc's 1st associate member”

Published Wednesday, September 16, 2026

Read by us on Thursday, September 17, 2026

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/eu-chief-ursula-von-der-leyen-proposes-canada-becoming-the-blocs-1st-associate-member>

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