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Canada–EU summit: an alliance with constrained ambitions

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Montreal hosted the 21st Canada–EU summit on 29–30 October. The summit was attended by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President António Costa, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas and Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney. The two sides announced the establishment of an 'Alliance for the Future' and agreed to begin work on a framework for building a deeper and more integrated relationship between Canada and the EU. They expect to present the results of this work next year.

The 'Alliance for the Future', outlined in the summit's final declaration, aims to strengthen cooperation in the following areas: trade and regulatory cooperation; digital, research and communications technologies, critical raw materials and energy; financial services and markets; security and preparedness, as well as people-to-people exchanges. As part of the initiative, the two sides concluded five agreements covering cooperation between Canada and the European Investment Bank, joint work on the IRIS² and Galileo satellite systems and digital services. They also agreed to seek ways to increase Canadian liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports to the EU, including through the development of port infrastructure. Canada and the EU reaffirmed their commitment to supporting Ukraine and increasing pressure on Russia. They also launched a bilateral dialogue on countering foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).

Ottawa and most EU capitals share a commitment to a rules-based international order, the promotion of democracy and multilateralism. However, concerns about Washington's response and pressure from the Trump administration constrain their ability to deepen cooperation on security and trade.

Commentary

- **Both EU institutions and the Canadian government used the summit to signal their solidarity in the face of pressure from the US and authoritarian powers such as Russia and China.** The two sides seek to reduce their strategic dependencies and gain greater freedom to act independently on the international stage. The alliance aims to give the EU and Canada a stronger joint voice in international affairs, uphold the rules-based international order and protect the interests of democratic states. Both sides also reaffirmed NATO's central role as a transatlantic military alliance and emphasised their commitment to ensuring that Europe and Canada take greater responsibility for their collective security.

- **Canada and the EU see opportunities to deepen their economic and security cooperation.** Although they already have a free trade agreement in place (CETA), Canadian companies are seeking greater integration into European supply chains, particularly in the defence, energy and emerging technologies sectors. This would help reduce Canada's vulnerability to economic pressure from the US and China, which accounted for 65% and 8% of its total trade respectively in 2025. For the EU, Canada's capacity to export energy resources and critical raw materials is particularly important. In 2025, the two sides concluded a Security and Defence Partnership. Brussels has highlighted Canada's involvement in key EU defence initiatives, including PESCO, capability coalitions, SAFE and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions. Canadian companies have already signed two small contracts under SAFE to supply tactical radios to Poland and helmets to Latvia. Canada's participation is intended to demonstrate the appeal of these initiatives to other non-EU countries, particularly the UK. Cooperation in sectors such as the space industry also serves their shared interests in the Arctic, where Russia and China are expanding their ambitions. Nevertheless, despite strained relations with Washington, Canada will remain an integral part of North American air and space defence through the binational NORAD command. Its defence industry will also remain closely integrated with the US arms industry, supported by import and export exemptions. In 2025, around 60% of Canadian exports of arms and military equipment went to the US.
- **Closer EU–Canada ties are unlikely to trigger another crisis in relations with the US. However, some EU capitals fear that they could provide the European Commission with another opportunity to expand its powers.** The Montreal summit was preceded by a heated debate within the EU over granting Canada associate member status, for which the EU treaties make no provision. Ursula von der Leyen had announced the proposal in her September State of the Union address without consulting member states beforehand. The formula of 'ever closer association', agreed shortly before the summit, gives Canada a special position while avoiding the impression that it would acquire some of the rights and obligations of EU membership. Such a prospect could prompt Washington to impose another round of retaliatory tariffs. Seeking to reduce its multifaceted dependence on the US, Ottawa sees the EU as a grouping of 'middle powers' that should work together to preserve their position in a world threatened by imperial ambitions. This vision is broadly shared by the leading EU capitals but conflicts with the European Commission's ambition to position the EU as a global power capable of exerting influence through trade and regulatory policy.