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Up against Trump, Canada's unlikely European destiny

Caught up in the offensive launched last December by Donald Trump against his northern neighbour, Canadians are now grappling with existential questions, leading them to rethink the ties that have bound them to the United States until now. America's 'betrayal' has prompted the country to question its real sovereignty and its future place in a disrupted world order. As a direct consequence of this upheaval, Europe is the focus of renewed interest within Canadian society. But is it a credible alternative to Canada's excessive dependence on its neighbour? Is it conceivable that the country could one day join the European Union? If not, what paths could lead to a shared future between these two major entities of the Western world?

The late awakening to a toxic dependency

Long seen as Canada's most loyal partner, the United States is now the object of unprecedented animosity from its northern neighbours, with only 27% now considering the United States an ally, whilst 26% see it as an enemy [2]. The feeling of betrayal is all the more intense because the mutual friendship that had existed between the two peoples was so strong that it sometimes bordered on intimacy. This closeness was geographical first and foremost, with a shared land border stretching nearly 9,000 kilometres. Two out of three Canadians live less than 100 kilometres from this line. More than 400,000 cross it every day to travel to the United States [3]. In addition, more than 800,000 Canadians live permanently with their neighbours, and 1.5 million work for American multinational companies based in Canada [4]. Linguistic and cultural similarities, as well as a long-shared history, bind these two nations, which fought side by side in Europe during both world wars and then co-founded the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in 1949. During the Cold War, Canada hosted no fewer than three American air defence lines on its territory to prevent possible attacks by the Soviet Union. Despite a few disagreements over the Arctic and the acceptance of deserters during the Vietnam War, the friendship between Ottawa and Washington has long seemed unbreakable.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, trade with the United States grew to account for 70% of Canadian trade flows in the early 2020s [5].

Since 29 November 2024, Donald Trump has repeatedly stated his desire to annex Canada and make it the 51st state of the United States. What initially appeared to be mere bluster on the part of the White House occupant quickly turned into a real threat with the immediate enactment of coercive customs and border measures. Once the initial shock had passed, a genuine wave of spontaneous and peaceful revolt quickly swept across the country. The boycott of American products and retail chains, as well as mass cancellation of planned trips to the United States were the first signs of this. Far from being short-lived, this defiance seems to be here to stay. According to a recent survey, two-thirds of Canadians continue to reduce their purchases of American goods, and 70% now prefer products of Canadian origin [1].

[1] According to the [most recent barometer](#), published in June 2025 by the Institut Léger on perceptions of US tariff policies

[2] *Idem.*

[3] [EU-Canada Relations](#)

[4] [Employment in Canada's multinational businesses](#):

Statistique Canada

[5] [Report](#) by economist Trevor Tombe for the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, Octobre 2024

The succession of trade agreements signed between the two countries over time has created one of the most comprehensive free trade areas in the world, to the point where it can be described as a truly 'symbiotic' economy [6]. Canada has benefited greatly from this dynamic in terms of job creation, investment, trade flows and economic growth.

But this economic symbiosis with a country whose GDP is more than twelve times greater than its own has also led to profound asymmetry and Canada's ever-increasing dependence on its powerful neighbour. The figure of \$94.4 billion in trade surplus accumulated by Ottawa in 2023 [7] - greatly exaggerated by Trump to justify his attacks [8] - is misleading if the precise nature of trade between the two countries is not analysed. The largest share of exports to the United States consists of raw materials (petroleum products, mining products, forestry, etc.) and manufactured goods subcontracted on behalf of American companies. In the value chain, it is US companies that capture the lion's share of the added value. For example, the western provinces of Canada mainly export crude oil, which is refined in the United States and then sold back to Canada or to third countries.

It is one of Canada's most striking paradoxes today: a highly developed country that continues to rely heavily on what can be described as a '[colonial](#)' economy. This has been to the almost exclusive benefit of its southern neighbour. Most of the energy transport infrastructure runs along a north-south axis, which hinders the ability to diversify customers to other countries. This de facto dependence, long accepted because of the trust Canadians had in their neighbour, has suddenly proved toxic and dangerous following Donald Trump's about-face. The wake-up call was especially brutal because the country did not expect such a deluge of threats and customs retaliation.

The Canadian leaders' mea culpa

The crisis triggered by Washington suddenly made Canada aware of its economic, political and military weaknesses. Because, in the litany of accusations that were now being fired at it, not everything was without grounds. Europe is often accused of having taken excessive advantage of the peace that has prevailed since the collapse of the USSR.

What can be said then of Canada, whose military spending dropped to 1% of its GDP in the mid-2010's? The main political parties in Canada now admit to their mistake and are promising to achieve a symbolic 2% by 2030. The possible withdrawal of the USA from NATO is evidently linked to this decision.

Ottawa is largely dependent on Washington for the defence of its territory, as it is for armaments, intelligence and heavy equipment. Those who, in June 2023, gave the go-ahead for the purchase of eighty-eight American F-35 fighter jets now seem to be kicking themselves, to the extent that current Prime Minister Mark Carney has ordered a review of this contract. The possibility of domestic production or purchasing European equipment will be reconsidered. At this stage, it is difficult to know whether the Canadian government wants to engage in a genuine decoupling or whether it is simply seeking to establish a less unfavourable balance of power in the tariff negotiations that are about to begin with the White House. The fact remains that the question of Canada's defence autonomy is all the more pressing given that the US president no longer hides his [Arctic ambitions](#) and his interest in the Northwest Passage. Although Canada's Far North carries little economic or demographic weight, it is strategically crucial to Ottawa's assertion of sovereignty. Moving cautiously so as not to offend Washington, Canada recently decided to strengthen its cooperation with Greenland and the Nordic countries of Europe.

There is another area in which Canada is beginning to assert itself more from a geostrategic point of view: its relations with China, which have long been slightly too friendly. The long-standing criticism that Ottawa is too lenient towards its main rival has been amplified with the return of Trump. Chinese investments in sensitive areas are now more closely monitored, and Beijing's interference is more often denounced. Nevertheless, the issue remains quite delicate in a country where the Chinese diaspora is extremely influential and at a time when the trade war means that Canada would prefer not to open a second front with the world's second largest economy.

Apart from military and geopolitical issues, the question attracting now the most intense self-criticism is, of course, Canada's extreme economic dependence on

[6] "Canada-USA: two symbiotic economies" - Embassy of France in Ottawa; October 2024

[7] Statistics of Canada's international trade, December 2024

[8] In his [press conference](#) at Mar-a-Lago on 7th January 2025, Donald Trump refers to a far-fetched figure of "around \$200 billion in 'subsidies' granted annually to Canada".

the United States, which successive governments have rather naively allowed to develop. Recently, a few commentators have dug up the prescient remarks made by [John Turner](#), leader of the Liberal Party, to the outgoing Conservative prime minister during the 1988 election campaign. Ottawa was then preparing to ratify a new treaty removing virtually all remaining customs barriers with the United States. Opposed to the treaty, Turner declared: *"We built [this country] on an infrastructure that deliberately resisted the continental pressure of the United States. With one signature of a pen, you have reversed that [...], and you will reduce us [...] to a colony of the United States."* He added: *"I don't believe Canadians are going to vote for Brian Mulroney, a man who would be governor of a 51st state!"* Turner lost the elections and the treaty was ratified.

With their backs against the wall, Canada's leaders have been forced to acknowledge their mistake and promise to diversify trade to loosen the stranglehold on their country. This undertaking is much more difficult than it appears. Canada certainly has many assets, particularly in terms of natural and agricultural resources, but the long-standing polarisation of its infrastructure towards the south makes it difficult, as things stand, to conquer markets beyond the continent. The most obvious example is undoubtedly the gas and oil facilities. Plans for oil pipelines to the Atlantic coast to facilitate exports to Europe have all been abandoned so far. However, it must be said that many European countries remain very reluctant to import hydrocarbons from oil sands.

Clearly, the complete reorganisation of the economy could take several decades. In this federalist country, the powers devolved to the provinces are numerous and sometimes a source of strong internal rivalry. For example, Canada has never completed the unification of its internal market — and this is a disadvantage. Numerous non-tariff barriers to interprovincial trade remain in place and are an obstacle to the development of both domestic and foreign trade. On June 6 last, aware of the problem, Prime Minister Mark Carney unveiled [legislation](#) aimed at speeding up the approval of infrastructure projects and removing internal trade barriers within the country. While a consensus seems to be emerging on this issue among the main federal parties, discussions with the provinces

are likely to be tough, as they remain protective of their prerogatives. The coming months will show whether the sudden political awakening that emerged during the 28 April elections will mark a lasting turning point in the country's future direction.

With Trump in office, the future of relations with Europe is being discussed

The new American president's attitude shook up the Canadian election in a way that, objectively speaking, is hardly favourable to him. The Liberal Party, which was at rock bottom in the polls just six months ago, staged an incredible comeback against the Conservative Party, which had long been considered the favourite to win the election. Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre suffered greatly from the neo-populist overtones of his campaign. His slogan, *'Canada First,'* a Canadian echo of Donald Trump's beloved *'America First,'* likely hurt him against his Liberal rival, who more opportunely opted for the slogan *'Canada Strong.'* Clearly polarised around the country's two historical parties, the vote also took on a strongly national character. In Quebec, the separatist party was soundly defeated by the Liberal Party, as if the province's aspirations for sovereignty had been absorbed by the national resistance to American interference.

Former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, worn down by nine years in power and a personal target of Donald Trump, even enjoyed a surge in popularity at the end of his term. In living memory, never since the post-war era, have federal general elections — usually focused on domestic issues — been so dominated by international issues. In this game, it must be acknowledged that it was the Liberals — Justin Trudeau and then Mark Carney — who were by far the best. It was under the impetus of Justin Trudeau, who had resigned from office, that Canada joined the 'coalition of the willing' initiated by several European states in support of Ukraine in the face of Washington's U-turn in early March. His designated successor, Mark Carney, followed suit and his first official trip, three days after his appointment, was not to the US capital, as is customary, but to France and the United Kingdom, two countries that have helped shape Canada's existence. The new Prime Minister is undoubtedly no stranger to this strengthening of ties with the old continent: internationally recognised

for his economic and financial expertise, from 2013 to 2020, he was the first non-British governor of the [Bank of England](#). Until recently, he held dual Canadian and British citizenship and played a major role in the tricky post-Brexit negotiations. This is a clear asset when it comes to tackling tariff talks with the Trump administration. Rebuilding closer ties with Europe is undoubtedly one of his goals. And many Canadians seem to agree with this idea.

This was also reflected in the [survey undertaken at the end of February 2025](#), which caused quite a stir in Canada and beyond: 46% of Canadians said they were in favour of their country joining the European Union (compared to 29% who were against). This was a godsend for Europeans and proof that the Union, so often vilified for the complexity of its functioning, remains more desirable than ever outside its borders.

On both sides of the Atlantic, debates – sometimes pointless – have arisen as to whether a non-European country could be eligible for such a candidacy. Some, arguing that Charles III – sovereign of Canada, although not a citizen of the Union – was European, considered the hypothesis feasible. Others preferred to emphasise the strong convergence of political values, the close proximity of economic systems and shared interests in defence to justify the relevance of such a move. Very few analysts, however, questioned the deeper significance of the survey results. When it comes to surveys, answers to questions that respondents are unfamiliar with often lead to confusion. It is therefore essential to distinguish between what is a well-founded and reasoned opinion and what is a simple emotional reaction prompted by the specific context of the moment. In fact, Canadians know little about the European Union, its scope, its powers, how it works and its lengthy accession procedures. In the same study, 47% of respondents said that joining the EU would improve relations between Canada and the United Kingdom.

A highly uncertain European future

Canada's new interest in Europe is the result of a strong emotional response towards the United States, rather than the fruit of a long-standing and mature attraction.

Although the American 'betrayal' is likely to leave lasting scars, it is not certain that Canadians are prepared to engage in such a clear and rapid shift in alliances. The desire for rebalancing and the need to regain greater sovereignty are one thing, but choosing the European Union is another. For example, it is difficult to imagine that a country whose economic prosperity is largely based on exports and a fairly favourable exchange rate for its national currency would ever agree to join the euro zone. Nor is it certain that the country would comply with the principle of free movement of persons within the Union. Not to mention that the end of the high degree of permeability of its border with the United States would have serious human, economic and social consequences for its population.

While the historical ties between Europe and Canada are undeniable, the fact remains that Canadians' perception of Europe extends well beyond the current borders of the Union. Their natural affinity for the United Kingdom is at least as strong as their affinity for the rest of the continent. Canada does not intend to choose one over the other, as Mark Carney's first official trip to Paris and London clearly demonstrated. From a strictly commercial point of view, trade with the United Kingdom accounts for more than half of Canada's total trade with the European Union.

Furthermore, there is no guarantee that all 27 EU Member States would welcome Canada's accession. In recent years, many of them have been gripped by deep existential doubts whenever a new accession has been considered, especially if the country in question is large and economically significant. The reasons for concern vary, but it is extremely real with regard to Turkey, Ukraine and, potentially also with Canada. In addition, and often for agricultural reasons – Canada is the world's eighth-largest exporter in this sector, the [free trade agreements](#) signed by the European Union are now the subject of increasingly vocal opposition.

Developing close cooperation within a wider area

While membership of the European Union does not appear to be a realistic prospect, the possibility of deeper cooperation between Europe and Canada is certainly

an opportunity to be seized. First, because the rise of authoritarian regimes and the decline of multilateralism on a global scale call for closer ties with nations that share the same values. Canada is not only a long-term member of NATO, the OECD, the International Criminal Court (ICC), the G7 and many other international organisations, it has also been a member of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) since its creation. Since 1996, it has also had official observer status within the Council of Europe.

The country's new situation creates a real window of opportunity for Europe. Canada is not the only [Commonwealth](#) country questioning the future of its relations with the United States. Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, although not subject to attacks as virulent as those levelled at Canada, are also concerned about the future of their alliances. There is now a strong opportunity for the European Union and part of the Commonwealth to move closer together. The establishment of a permanent forum between these countries could facilitate the development of closer ties.

In terms of defence policy, NATO in its current form appears to be under threat. The European defence project promoted by the EU is struggling to make headway within the highly divided 27-member bloc. Moreover, it will have little credibility without the active participation of the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the geostrategic issues surrounding the Arctic and the northern Atlantic make the involvement of Canada and several other non-EU Nordic countries increasingly essential. This is therefore an opportunity to establish an ad hoc architecture, similar to that outlined in the recent creation of the 'coalition of the willing', which would extend beyond the current perimeter of the European Union.

Canada is also a major player in research and new technologies. Its research centres are particularly renowned in the fields of artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, neuroscience, health technologies and automation. In July 2024, the country officially joined part of the [Horizon Europe](#) framework programme. Many other areas of cooperation could be developed. As in Europe, major Canadian universities are currently investing heavily to attract and recruit American

researchers who wish to leave their country due to attacks on academic freedom and cuts in public funding. It would be essential to better coordinate these efforts within a multinational framework rather than engaging in fierce competition. This is especially important given that Canada, thanks to its cultural and geographical proximity, has great potential to attract researchers in this field.

The country also has significant reserves of rare earths and critical minerals, which are essential to many industries. Current threats to Europe's supply are already prompting some countries, such as Germany, to discuss the issue with Ottawa. While the majority of Canadian production is currently exported to the United States, the government intends to diversify its markets, and the European Union could play a more important role, provided it acts more as one and invests more significantly in the infrastructure needed to exploit these mineral resources in Canada.

In this area, as in all other commercial sectors, the European Union and the United Kingdom are, in principle, partners of choice for Canada in its proactive diversification policy. However, they must not forget that competition with other powers is fierce. A survey conducted at the end of April highlights that the percentage of Canadians wanting [stronger trade relations with China](#) has risen from 7% to 31% in under two years. Canada's wish to revive trade with Europe is not new, but the impact of the measures already taken remains limited. Hence, [the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement signed between Canada and the European Union](#), which partially entered into force in September 2017 after more than thirteen years of negotiations, is still a long way off reaching its full potential. The blame lies with a dozen Member States, including France, which have still not agreed to ratify this treaty. At a time when everyone agrees that it would be appropriate to strengthen our ties with Canada, certain politicians would be well advised to reconsider the reasons that led them to oppose ratification.

As things stand, Canada's future as a member of the EU remains highly unlikely. Perhaps this is not desirable, given that Europe is still struggling to define its own

place in a world undergoing profound change. That is why, given this uncertainty, we must not allow the improbable to prevent us from thinking of new and sometimes unprecedented ways to move forward together. In this regard, the [agreement](#) to strengthen cooperation on defence and trade, signed on 23 June between the European Union and Canada – notably involving the participation by the latter in the “[ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030](#)” as well as the establishment of an annual dialogue on

security and defence - constitutes a first concrete and pragmatic step forward, which should soon augur well for others.

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