
EXPERT GROUP ON CANADA-U.S. RELATIONS

A Middle Power Charter for a Troubled World

Building on Burgeoning Canada-EU Ties

A JOINT PUBLICATION OF



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European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Prime Minister Mark Carney aim to define and develop a new relationship between Canada and Europe at a Summit on October 29-30, 2026. They have already described the relationship as an “alliance” that might include a bespoke status of “associate membership” for Canada in the European Union. This undertaking would build on the Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), the landmark new EU-Canada Strategic Partnership of the Future and the Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) signed in Brussels on June 23, 2025.

Before moving forward, the two leaders should ask themselves three fundamental questions: What are the goals of such a partnership? What are its principles? And should it remain a Canada-EU undertaking or become the nucleus of a broader compact among the world’s leading democracies to address the profound upheaval we all face? We believe that it should serve as a broader compact among the world’s middle powers.

A Ruptured International Order

The problems facing the world’s democracies and middle powers are clear.

The international order established after the Second World War, grounded in sovereign equality among nations, territorial integrity, collective security, open, rules-based trade, human rights, democratic governance and international law, has been severely compromised. The United States no longer plays by the rules it itself developed and negotiated. The world is wracked by rising interstate and intrastate conflict, reversing the decline in conflict after the Cold War ended. The United States and China act as hegemons in different ways. Russia’s war against Ukraine threatens Europe’s borders. Sustained wars in the Middle East risk spilling beyond the region, while putting significant pressure on global energy supplies.

Canada and Europe, like democracies elsewhere, confront challenges in economic security and equality, democratic resilience, technological sovereignty and territorial defence. Canada, especially, but also the EU, the United Kingdom, Japan, the Republic of Korea and others, are dealing with the consequences of the United States’ turn to protectionism and nativism. The United States has weaponized the bonds of commerce forged over 80 years of interdependence to

pursue economic advantage, even though this causes economic harm globally.

Beyond a Transactional Partnership

This new age requires a response that goes beyond a transactional approach, entailing bilateral and sector-specific agreements. It requires commitments that make manifest a shared sense of political and economic purpose, anchored in common values and a commitment to work together to address these challenging times.

Such values should be stated explicitly and reflect a commitment to the principles that Canada, Europe and other middle powers are prepared to defend: accountable government, sovereignty, the peaceful settlement of disputes, adherence to the rule of law, respect for human dignity, open and fair economic exchange, and the willingness to stand up to coercion and aggression.

This moment of global “rupture” requires a shared vision. Prime Minister Carney’s speech to the World Economic Forum at Davos in January 2026 remains instrumental, outlining a strategic framework for Canada and other middle powers that would be both “principled and pragmatic.”

Learning from the 1941 Atlantic Charter

A clear starting point would be to reaffirm the principles of the Atlantic Charter.

Issued by U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill after their meeting off Placentia Bay, Newfoundland, in August 1941, the Charter had no formal status, but it laid the foundations for the United Nations, the Bretton Woods economic system and the postwar alliance anchored by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Canada was not a party to the original declaration, but it endorsed it soon thereafter and was among the original signatories of the Declaration by United Nations in January 1942, which became the basis of the UN.

This history is instructive. A formal statement by two leaders became, within five months, the common platform for 26 nations. A new charter fit for the present should follow the same trajectory — launched by Canada and Europe but also framed as an invitation to like-minded middle powers everywhere.

The language of the original Atlantic Charter reflected the tenor of its time. But its key commitments are just as salient today: no territorial aggrandizement; no alteration of borders by force; the right of peoples to determine their own political future; economic cooperation; freedom from want or fear; freedom of navigation on the high seas; and a durable system of collective security.

What a New Charter Would Affirm

A charter for the 21st century should reaffirm the 1941 commitments but go beyond them.

It should also lay out principles for a democratic, middle-power compact for the digital age. The defence of democracy now depends on the integrity of information systems, data and digital infrastructure as much as it does on military strength and capability. Canada, Europe and other democracies should commit to ensuring that technology does not undermine human dignity, human security and democratic self-government, or, for that matter, threaten humanity's very survival.

A new charter should rest on five principles:

- 1. Democracy must be defended at home.**
The world's middle powers agree to uphold at home the principles of democratic governance they champion globally: free and fair elections, the peaceful transfer of power, the rule of law and an independent judiciary, freedom of expression and a free press, and the protection of human and minority rights. They agree — separately and together — to strengthen their own democratic institutions and to counter foreign interference, disinformation and attempts to exploit political polarization. Democracies hollowed out from within cannot stand up for themselves or their partners.
- 2. Every nation has the right to determine its own future, free from force or coercion.**
The world's middle powers agree to uphold the principles of territorial integrity and self-government. They pledge not to interfere in each other's democratic processes and to work together to oppose covert funding, disinformation, cyber operations and support for anti-democratic movements. They reject the notion that borders can be changed by force, that democratic choices can be overturned, or that countries can be coerced through military, economic, technological or other means.
- 3. Interdependence should be a source of shared strength, never a weapon.**
The world's middle powers agree to work together to reduce vulnerabilities across critical supply chains, financial services, energy, technology, infrastructure and defence industries. They agree never to use trade, finance or digital services as instruments of coercion. This commitment does not extend to legitimate sanctions and defensive measures taken under international law, such as responses to aggression or measures to protect national security and critical infrastructure. Each country also retains the sovereign right to choose its economic and trade partners but also agrees to exercise this right in ways

that do not undermine the economic security of its other partners.

4. **Democracies are stronger when they work together than any would be acting alone.**

The world's middle powers agree to combine their strengths through joint investment, co-production and shared capabilities in defence, critical technologies, energy, research and infrastructure, achieving the scale needed to deter aggression and secure prosperity, which no single democracy can achieve on its own.

5. **An open, rules-based international order serves every nation better than a world defined by great-power competition and spheres of influence.**

The world's middle powers agree to work together to uphold international law, strengthen multilateral institutions, and act urgently on global challenges no country can meet alone: climate change, biodiversity loss, global pandemics, food and water insecurity, the unchecked development of artificial intelligence, and the spread of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction.

The Case for Canadian Leadership

Canada did not participate in the drafting of the original Atlantic Charter. But Canada can now lead toward a new charter in these fraught times, given Canada's longstanding commitment to multilateralism and its unmatched position

as a bridge between Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

A new charter would not detract from the deeper bilateral relationship Canada and the EU are considering. It would build on this as the world's other middle-power democracies sign on to principles and steps that all should find befitting. Indeed, countries such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand should be invited to help shape the new charter from the outset. It would then be open to any other democracy prepared to uphold the enunciated principles.

The purpose would be to create an expanding club. The door would also be left open to a future U.S. administration that chose to adhere to the principles of the new charter. These principles should serve as the basis of a work programme with tangible priorities, responsibilities, and clear benchmarks of progress. In this way, the charter would move beyond a statement of shared values to become a practical agenda for collective action.

In a time of rupture, Canada and the EU must reach beyond their own security and prosperity to set out and encourage global adherence to the principles by which a freer, safer and more democratic world can be sustained and strengthened.

Appendix

ATLANTIC CHARTER AUGUST 14, 1941

The President of the United States of America and the Prime Minister, Mr. Churchill, representing His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, being met together, deem it right to make known certain common principles in the national policies of their respective countries on which they base their hopes for a better future for the world.

First, their countries seek no aggrandizement, territorial or other;

Second, they desire to see no territorial changes that do not accord with the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned;

Third, they respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them;

Fourth, they will endeavour, with due respect for their existing obligations, to further the enjoyment by all States, great or small, victor or vanquished, of access, on equal terms, to the trade and to the raw materials of the world which are needed for their economic prosperity;

Fifth, they desire to bring about the fullest collaboration between all nations in the economic field with the object of securing, for all, improved labour standards, economic advancement and social security;

Sixth, after the final destruction of the Nazi tyranny, they hope to see established a peace which will afford to all nations the means of dwelling in safety within their own boundaries, and which will afford assurance that all the men in all lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want;

Seventh, such a peace should enable all men to traverse the high seas and oceans without hindrance;

Eighth, they believe that all of the nations of the world, for realistic as well as spiritual reasons must come to the abandonment of the use of force. Since no future peace can be maintained if land, sea or air armaments continue to be employed by nations which threaten, or may threaten, aggression outside of their frontiers, they believe, pending the establishment of a wider and permanent system of general security, that the disarmament of such nations is essential. They will likewise aid and encourage all other practicable measure which will lighten for peace-loving peoples the crushing burden of armaments.

Franklin D. Roosevelt

Winston S. Churchill

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