

Enduring Partnership or Ambitious Agenda?

Insights into International Order from Canada and the EU's Security and Defence Partnership

Amid shifting global geopolitics, Canada and the European Union forge deeper ties through an “Enduring Partnership, Ambitious Agenda”. But what drives this unprecedented security cooperation between two prominent middle powers, and what insights does it offer into an evolving international order shaped by changing strategic commitments? The partnership suggests a reconfiguration of roles and responsibilities within the liberal international order.

Dr. Lilit Klein, September 4th 2025

Canada and the European Union's Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) reveals more about shared values impacting global security commitments and the nature of the international order than the partnership itself might suggest. The *Joint Statement: Enduring Partnership, Ambitious Agenda* of June 23rd, 2025 marks a deepening of the security relationship between two of the most prominent middle powers of the international order. What motivates this cooperative move and what can we learn from it about the current condition of the rules-based liberal international order (LIO)? Does this agreement signal merely a re-commitment to the order – a continuation and natural progression of past cooperation within the same framework – or is this borne out of a perception of threat that calls for a launch of a new bilateral security framework? This security snapshot investigates the nature of the burgeoning SDP, commenting on the parties' shared values and global security commitments, as well as what it indicates about the state of the larger international order. To begin, this snapshot briefly summarizes Canadian European

cooperation over the past two decades before looking at the SDP and its benefits for both parties and concludes by analyzing what the SDP may signal about the international order at large.

A Brief History of Partnership

The SDP is only the latest, and deepest, iteration of security cooperation between Canada and the EU. It was preceded by the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) of 2016, which deepened bilateral cooperation and was based both on the 1976 Framework Agreement for Commercial and Economic Cooperation and the 2004 EU-Canada Partnership Agenda. Since 2017, the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) has governed bilateral trade and succeeded in increasing trade by a staggering 65% (Summit Joint Statement 2025, 7). Beginning in 2021, Canada entered an administrative agreement with the EU to take part in the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)'s Military Mobility Project and, subsequently, joined NetLogHubs, which aims to expedite deployment to humanitarian crises and combat missions, in

February 2023. Also in the military realm, Canada has contributed to the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) since 2003, so far participating in thirteen civilian and military missions. Whereas cooperation has been long-standing, the security aspect appears to have become more pronounced recently. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, emphasizes that “We have an excellent partnership, between two strong democracies, bound by historic ties, and connected by a trade partnership that is fair, dynamic and open... It is time to go to the next level, to step up the intensity of our partnership.” (NYT 2025)

Enduring Partnership, Ambitious Agenda

The June 2025 agreement establishing the Security and Defence Partnership is described as a:

non-legally binding partnership that reaffirms and regroups our security and defence activities with the EU under a single political framework. It also opens up opportunities to explore cooperation in a number of domains – Ukraine, crisis management, peacekeeping (policy), military mobility and interoperability, defence procurement, maritime security, cyber, hybrid, counter-terrorism, arms control, disarmament, space security, AI and emerging and disruptive technology, mediation and conflict prevention, climate and security, energy security, human security and Women, Peace and Security – among others. (GOC 2025, “Canada and the European Union”)

This security cooperation is deeply entwined with shared values, the premise on which trust is built. The language of the SDP reflects this fundamental understanding. The partnership is “deeply rooted in trust and common values ...[and] grounded in the core values we share: democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and open, rules-based markets” (Summit Joint Statement 2025, 2). These characteristics also define the LIO and both parties are integral to upholding them. One question therefore is whether the SDP indicates that both EU and Canada perceive of a need to

secure these values, or that another party of the LIO has distanced themselves from these shared values and commitments? The institutionalization of annual security and defence dialogues (Perrin *et al* 2025) suggests an affirmative answer to at least the first half of this question. Re-affirming and formalizing repeated interactions can increase the already existing foundations of trust. Beyond dialogue, the agreement also establishes concrete operational frameworks that translate this trust into practical cooperation. The SDP lays the groundwork for Canada’s participation in ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 and Security Action for Europe (SAFE) and “launches negotiations for a bilateral agreement to allow Canadian defence companies to participate in EU joint procurement projects” (Perrin *et al* 2025, 10). Canada will also post a defence representative to the EU. This multi-layered approach which combines trust-enhancing dialogue with plans for tangible security collaboration indicates both parties view this partnership as essential to their long-term security architecture.

Benefits and Anticipated Challenges of the SDP

Canada has recently said that it “views Europe as a crucial ally amid shifting global geopolitics” (Salt 2025), a perspective similarly echoed by von der Leyen (2025). Thus, one advantage of the SDP is mutual assurance of future cooperation on international crises. This agreement will also likely decrease both parties’ reliance on the United States due to supply chain integration, though this may play out unevenly. Whereas Canada is looking forward to decreasing its vulnerability to its escalating trade issues with the US, Europe is keen to secure continued access to Canada’s abundance of raw and critical materials. The SDP therefore benefits both parties and the larger international order as it unites two powers committed to international peace, stability, and human rights while reducing their dependence on an, at best, reluctant hegemon. As Ngaire Woods (2025) notes “multilateralism without a hegemon has a long history in Europe.” This European experience may be particularly attractive to Canada as it seeks to diversify its strategic

partnerships beyond its historical integration with the US across military, security, and trade domains.

Canada and the EU generally align on current international crises, as demonstrated in both SPA and SDP throughout the years. They jointly condemn Russia's acts of aggression against Ukraine, agreeing on the necessity to increase pressure on the former. They also express their support for a ceasefire in Gaza, voice concern about Israel and Iran, and meet on the need to maintain peace in the Indo-Pacific (Summit Joint Statement 2025). In addition to their alignment on core values of the LIO, they share the desire to tackle international crises jointly, in contrast with the US, which appears more inclined towards unilateral modes of action. The SDP is further evidence of a shared normative framework between the signatories.

Hon. Perrin Beatty and his co-authors (Perrin *et al* 2025), members of the Norman Paterson School's Expert Group on Canada-US relations, highlight two main benefits for Canada: first, the SDP reduces Canada's vulnerability to US policies and trade tensions; second, it integrates Canada into the European supply chain, fostering innovation and procurement, which is also expected to boost resilience amidst global trade uncertainties. These are impactful benefits for a country aware that "not all equipment can be sourced within Canada, especially in the shorter term" (Salt 2025). As Prime Minister Carney acknowledges, Canada "should no longer send three-quarters of our defence capital spending to America... the United States is beginning to monetize its hegemony: charging for access to its markets and reducing its relative contributions to our collective security" (Carney cited in Salt 2025). The SDP presents opportunity for Canada to turn to a partner more willing to contribute to collective security. Mark Camilleri (2025), Special Advisor European Union to the Business Council of Canada, goes even further, asserting that "Canada, for its part, should rethink its traditional economic reliance on the United States. What was once regarded as a strategic advantage has, in the face of America's changing strategic posture, become a source of

vulnerability. As a result, both Canada and the EU now see diversification – not just of markets, but of partnerships – as a strategic imperative." Carney and Camilleri's quotes suggest that the SDP reflects Canada's reassessment of its strategic dependence on the US as well as an effort to build an alternative partnership more closely aligned with its long-term security and economic interests.

Canada faces two prominent anxieties concerning the SDP's likelihood of success in addition to expected fiscal constraints, political- and structural obstacles, and implementation hurdles (Perrin *et al* 2025). Although defence diversification should, in theory, grow Canada's GDP by 0.8%, and therefore reduce US dependency by the intended 75-40%, it is expected to catalyze US retaliation by either importing less Canadian goods or leveraging constraints emerging out of International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) to limit the Canadian-EU defense technology sharing (Perrin *et al* 2025). ITAR may, and likely will, constrain Canadian firms' pivot to the EU market, as their "'Canadian exemption' (Paragraph 126.5) permits limited technology transfers to Canada [from the US] but explicitly blocks re-exports to third countries like EU members ... creating somewhat of a catch-22: Canadian firms risk U.S. sanctions if they prioritize EU partnerships but lose competitiveness if they maintain the status quo." (Perrin *et al* 2025, 8) It is thus unclear how the SDP will circumvent ITAR, and resultantly, whether the EU will be able to access the Canadian defence industry in the way both parties intend. The US, while not party to the agreement, could potentially act as an obstacle that constrains the agreement's usefulness to its members. This remains an evolving situation. However, should ITAR become an obstacle, recentring discussions on NATO DIANA accelerators and Canada's myriad dual-use technologies (Grounds 2025), may offer a promising path forward, as these are less likely to face ITAR restrictions. Ultimately, the shared benefit of reduced strategic dependency and enhanced security cooperation provides strong enough motivation for both Canada and the EU to try to overcome both internal and external

regulatory obstacles they might face and develop creative solutions to advance their partnership.

The SDP offers Europe equally compelling strategic advantages. German experts note Canada as a key partner for energy and critical minerals procurement, highlighting specifically Canada's abundance of lithium, nickel, and cobalt (Schebesta and Woelkner 2024). Canada has actively pursued this partnership opportunity and on August 26th, Carney announced with Chancellor Friedrich Merz that Canada and Germany had reached a cooperation agreement on critical minerals (Lou *et al* 2025). Notably, the EU is already Canada's second largest critical minerals customer (von der Leyen 2025), making the SDP as much about securing existing supply chains as building new ones. In addition to critical minerals, German companies are particularly strong investors in Canada's green transformation (Steinacher 2025), adding another layer of interdependence beyond traditional security cooperation.

Beyond these strategic considerations, the agreement also promises significant economic advantages for both parties. The EU benefits from partnership with Canada but it is worth noting that, though Canada is only the EU's twelfth largest trading partner (1.4% of total EU's external trade in 2024), the EU is in fact Canada's second, accounting for 8% of Canada's trade in 2023 (TEUAC 2025). Despite this imbalance, CETA boosted EU trade and diversified its supply chain, creating "a 64% increase in EU goods exports and an 81% increase in EU services exports to Canada; and an increase in the EU's gross domestic product (GDP), which has become €3.2 billion higher each year" (TEUAC 2025).

The deteriorating international environment also motivates the EU's deepened partnership with Canada and von der Leyen (2025) specifically draws attention to the importance of, and the EU's appreciation for, Canada's security aid in Eastern Europe. Canada extended its military mission in Latvia to 2029 on August 26th (Lord 2025), highlighting Canada as a capable security partner in this strategically crucial region for Europe given Russian aggression. Canada's European mission

will effectively constrain its Army's capacity for deployments elsewhere, reflecting a strategic commitment to maintaining a permanent military presence in Europe (Moss 2025). In part due to the Russian threat, Europe is concerned by the potential of the US's departure from NATO (Barry and Barrie 2025) and sensitive to losing the US as its security guarantor. Brookings summarizes this dilemma, commenting that "for decades, European capability planning within NATO has assumed a US backstop, resulting in built-in dependencies and structural gaps. European militaries were designed to plug into US-led coalitions, not operate independently at scale." (Besch 2025) The SDP demonstrates Europe's challenge to this assumption as it deepens its partnership with Canada independently of the US.

Implications of the SDP for the International Order

Understanding whether the SDP signals merely a natural progression of past cooperation and recommitment to the rules-based international order or reflects shared concerns about the order's stability is central to interpreting the agreement. The evidence suggests the latter. Although the SDP recommits Canada and the EU to the rules of the existing LIO, it *also* indicates a perception of change. More specifically, the parties may perceive a diffusion of security responsibilities within the order, with a potential to endanger the stability of that order. Yet in crafting this agreement to secure that stability, they may paradoxically face criticism of undermining it themselves. While one could argue that bilateral agreements outside existing multilateral structures might undermine international order, the SDP's content indicates it upholds the LIO's values rather than departing from them. The SDP, in fact, begins by "confirm[ing] our unwavering commitment to the rules-based international order with the United Nations and its charter at its core" (Summit Joint Statement, 3). This commitment is reinforced by the rationale both parties provide for the partnership. The Canadian government writes that the EU and Canada "face a deteriorating security environment and must tackle common

threats and challenges together. Our security is interconnected and interdependent.” (GOC 2025, Security and Defence Partnership Between the European Union and Canada) The impetus for the agreement signals this perceived and noted change (or even threat) to the current status quo, and the SDP can be understood as a doubling down and securing of order, many aspects of which appear less stable and less dependable as they did in the past.

Another reason for the SDP is the evolving US strategic posture, which has created uncertainty about America’s future commitments to both Canada and Europe. Observers disagree on whether this represents an inward turn by the US – reflecting a reduced willingness to contribute to collective security as noted in Carney’s earlier quote – or a strategic pivot toward other theatres, particularly China, coupled with an expectation that European allies should assume greater responsibility for their own regional security, as articulated by US Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth (2025). In either case, the SDP is likely intended, at least in part, as a tool to dim the consequences of the change in the US’s behaviour on the global stage. Crucially, however, the US might benefit from this partnership, even if it is not party to the SDP. This partnership is likely to further enshrine values of the system the US set up and has benefited from. Moreover, by reducing the EU’s dependence on the US as a security guarantor, the SDP may free up resources that the US can expend elsewhere. The US will also undoubtedly benefit from NATO’s enhanced security posture in Eastern Europe and European countries assuming greater defence responsibilities. It would be somewhat premature to proclaim the SDP as the EU’s attempt to replace the US with Canada as a security guarantor. Nonetheless, it is a step toward independence from the US.

How will the US respond to the alternative security arrangements emerging due to its reduced engagement? One challenge the SDP might face both from the US and others is that this could be interpreted as a plurilateral effort– an approach that divides observers between those who view

such arrangements as strengthening international order through flexibility and those who see them as undermining cohesion characteristic to multilateralism. Michael Froman, the former United States Trade Representative and president of the Council on Foreign Relations, writes that to “prevent unilateralism from spinning out of control...the best option for moving forward is to craft a system made up of coalitions of the like-minded, which together would constitute a network of open plurilateral relationships – smaller and more flexible than the multilateral trading system.” Is the SDP an example of plurilateralism?

Plurilateralism is defined, by the World Trade Organization (WTO) (2012), as countries negotiating outside the multilateral framework, a process which “represents a reaction to the failure of multilateralism [with] some countries not [being] willing to move forward in the liberalisation process”. This concept, though rooted in trade discourse, is applicable here given the SDP’s substantial focus on defence industrial cooperation. As the SDP explicitly roots itself in both the UN Charter and the rules-based international order, it cannot be argued that it operates outside the multilateral framework. Froman (2025) speaks of a new system, “a system of rules outside the rules-based system of old”. The SDP is not a system of rules outside the old, but rather a smaller-scale bilateral re-affirmation of the international order; it is not a plurilateral effort at this point in time.

The WTO (2012) notes that plurilateral efforts fragment multilateralism and violate its principle of universality. Translated to this context, one concern is that the US could misinterpret the SDP as a plurilateral effort endangering multilateralism and pay more attention to its exclusion than the benefits. It remains to be seen whether the US will perceive of the SDP as undermining the LIO, though as the above discussion indicates, stressing the restrictions Canada is under due to ITAR might be one vehicle through which the US can signal its discontent with the agreement. US think tanks and media have so far been surprisingly muted in their

comments on the SDP. This is somewhat curious given that European rearmament aligns with longstanding US strategic interest and the US's position as Canada's primary defence partner and the agreement's move towards Canadian decoupling.

The SDP signals that there may be a shift in Canada and the EU's roles within and for the LIO. The two parties, relegated in the past to close partners of the US hegemon, are today taking on a larger role in maintaining international order. As G. John Ikenberry (2021) commented to the Conference of Defence Associations: "the period of American hegemony we saw in the post-war era can't be recreated. We need a larger coalition of countries to lead the world now. That is where middle powers, like Canada, can play their part—countries that are not superpowers but are high-capacity democracies that can show us the way." Similarly, Joseph Nye heralded Canada as a key stronghold of international order, highlighting particularly its soft power (Hampson and Welsh 2025). Both Canada and the EU have been benefactors of the rules-based international order and are therefore likely interested in upholding its benefits. This partnership not only reaffirms the LIO's values but clearly demonstrates the parties' strategic pivot toward establishing secure footing in the midst of a diffusion of both the power to uphold and the responsibilities for the international order. For both parties, navigating this transition requires strengthening partnerships.

Future Considerations

The Security and Defence Partnership is rooted not only in shared values and mutual benefits but also represents a deepening of traditional Canada-Europe cooperation patterns, driven by concerns about the current state of the LIO. Noting the US's pivot and reduced commitment to the LIO, the SDP signals both a desire to reinforce the existing international order and a reconfiguration of responsibilities among its

defenders. The partnership indicates evolution rather than collapse of the order. The institutionalisation and enshrinement of these powerful middle powers' security guarantees to one another demonstrate the LIO's durability despite reduced engagement from its former champion. Assuming the US continues to divest from the system it once led, Canada and the EU will take on greater responsibility for upholding the order, suggesting the SDP will likely deepen through continued security dialogues.

Three integral questions arise from the SDP and will implicate its future success. First, will Canada manage to pivot towards Europe given its defence industry's close intertwinement with the US, or will its efforts to diversify shatter due to ITAR? In some ways this is also a question of how comfortable the US will be with Canada's decoupling effort. It is crucial again to underscore that a strong partnership between Canada and the EU is likely to benefit the US, even if just collaterally so, and honours the US's vocal preference to focus its resources on geopolitical struggles elsewhere. A healthy partnership between strong democracies who have enshrined the values of the LIO could translate to less dependence and therefore decreased stress on the US, as long as this partnership does not clash with NATO goals, which in the SDP's current iteration appears unlikely. Second, will Europe be able to ramp up its defence in the way that it has announced? The SDP is expected to be supplementary to Europe's rearmament plans, meaning, the SDP does not replace the US with Canada as a security guarantor for the EU. Third, and finally, will Canada and the EU gain the stability and security from this agreement they seek in the context of this less predictable international order? Only time will tell, but there are reasons to be optimistic that a partnership between value-sharing democracies can only lead to improvement of circumstances, even if just a decrease in the perception of threat and impending doom.

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List of Acronyms:

CETA – Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement

CSDP – Common Security and Defence Policy (EU)

ITAR – International Traffic in Arms Regulations

LIO – Liberal International Order

NATO DIANA – NATO's Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic

PESCO – Permanent Structured Cooperation (EU)

SAFE – Security Action for Europe

SDP – Security and Defence Partnership

SPA – Strategic Partnership Agreement

WTO – World Trade Organization

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