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BRIEFING NOTE

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What does it mean to call countries “middle powers”? It is not a label many actively seek and it often obscures more than it clarifies. A more useful question is how countries that are not among the world’s largest economies can still shape outcomes in trade, rules, and standards.

That question, and the broader idea of “middle powers” and where cooperation is possible, drew mixed reactions at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute’s annual trade conference in Ottawa, where I put it directly to a panel of senior diplomats from India and Malaysia, along with the head of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. Some preferred to avoid the label and focus on working with like-minded partners. Others saw “middle-power” groupings as too vague to deliver results. Still, most agreed the concept has value only if it is tied to practical goals.

That practical focus is essential. As Prime Minister Mark Carney argued in Davos, the idea is only useful as a policy tool, not a slogan. Results come from targeted cooperation around specific interests, not from broad identity or rhetoric.

Canada’s experience supports this. The Cairns Group showed how a coalition of agricultural exporters could advance shared goals in multilateral trade by putting agriculture on the agenda of the Uruguay Round, ultimately shaping the WTO Agreement on Agriculture. It mattered not because it was universal, but because it was focused, disciplined, and built around concrete outcomes.

The Ottawa Group offers a more recent example. Canada brought together a small set of WTO members to pursue incremental reforms, including support for the interim Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA), a stop-gap mechanism to appeal trade disputes in the absence of a fully functioning WTO Appellate Body. This work shows how small coalitions can keep parts of the rules-based system functioning when broader consensus is hard to reach.

Taken together, these examples suggest that “middle power” is best understood as a flexible approach, not a fixed category. It can take the form of sector-specific coalitions, informal partnerships, or issue-based networks. The goal is not to form a bloc, but to organize around specific problems and deliver measurable results.

Former Canadian diplomats often argue that Canada is most effective when working with “constructive countries” through steady, patient diplomacy, using convening power and a tradition of Canadian “functionalism,” where countries earn a seat



at the table by showing up with ideas, competence, and credibility rather than sheer weight of power. Academic and trade policy experts echo this from the economic side, noting that Ottawa's leverage comes less from scale and more from how it designs and implements, for example, advanced trade and digital agreements with partners like the EU, and key Indo-Pacific economies to advance its interests. Taken together, these perspectives point to a clear conclusion: Canada's influence depends on practical engagement, using trade agreements, standards, and institutions to solve specific problems rather than on middle-power rhetoric.

Standards deserve more attention as a strategic tool. In areas such as AI, digital trade, energy, and agri-food, countries that help set rules early can shape markets, support regulatory alignment, and strengthen supply chains. Coalitions do not need to dominate, but they do need to be organized, aligned internally, and present where decisions are made.

The Canada–EU relationship fits squarely within this approach. CETA provides a strong foundation and significant market opportunities, but it remains underused on the Canadian side. Distance, regulatory complexity, and uneven implementation continue to limit its potential, with market access often falling short in practice despite ambitious commitments on paper. Too often, Canada and the EU share similar policy objectives but pursue them through different regulatory approaches; the challenge is to use tools such as equivalence and mutual recognition more systematically to bridge those gaps.

There are clear signs of progress. Canada and the EU are advancing negotiations toward a digital trade agreement, to help shape rules in a fast-moving area of the global economy. At the same time, steps to operationalize the Canada–EU Industrial Policy Dialogue point to a more structured cooperation on supply chains, competitiveness, and strategic sectors. Both reflect a shift toward targeted, issue-based collaboration where business participation will be critical.

This reinforces a broader point: implementation matters as much as ambition. CETA includes mechanisms for regulatory cooperation, such as the Regulatory Cooperation Forum, and tools like the conformity assessment protocol, to reduce duplication, misalignment, and costs for businesses. These only deliver if used actively and focused on real commercial barriers.

Industry must also be directly involved in policy and standard-setting discussions. Governments can sign agreements, but companies test whether they work. Turning frameworks into real market access, industry must help identify opportunities, barriers, set priorities, and develop workable pathways early on. Strong, proactive government–industry collaboration is essential, especially in highly regulated sectors.



Unlocking this potential requires sustained cooperation, practical regulatory alignment, and a clear focus on outcomes. Without that, even well-designed agreements risk underperforming and eroding confidence.

This is where “coalitions, not illusions” matters most. Frameworks and declarations only count if they produce real economic results. For Canada and the EU, that means moving from agreement to execution: aligning regulatory approaches where possible, improving transparency, and ensuring commitments translate into usable market access.

Expectations should remain realistic. Canada will not shape the global order on its own. But by building focused coalitions, with the EU among others, working closely with industry, and following through on implementation, it can shape key areas of trade and standards in practical and meaningful ways. That means continuing - and intensifying - the longer-term work of regulatory cooperation, standard-setting, and institutional partnerships so that Canada helps shape the rules, rather than simply adapting to those set by others.

About the Author

Claire Citeau is the Executive Vice-President, Trade and Public Affairs at the Canadian Pork Council, and a Fellow at the Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute, the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, and the University of Ottawa.

Claire has held senior positions with Alberta's Ministries of Agriculture and International Affairs on trade development and investment attraction initiatives in Europe and the Americas. Ms. Citeau has built a reputation for forging strong partnerships with governments and business leaders in Canada and abroad and managing complex, priority trade initiatives.

Claire holds a double MBA in international business as a graduate of the University of Alberta and the Montpellier Graduate School of Business in France. She has lived in Senegal, France and Canada.

Canadian Global Affairs Institute

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