

Sarkozy's visit to cement new ties with Quebec

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QUEBEC CITY — For the first time, a French President will speak before the Quebec National Assembly when Nicolas Sarkozy delivers an address next month heralding a new era in France's relations with Quebec and Canada.

The French President is expected to clarify France's new policy toward Quebec that promotes what Mr. Sarkozy has called “direct and privileged relations” with the province, while building “partnerships” with the rest of Canada.

However, there are concerns within the Quebec government that recent tensions between Premier Jean Charest and Stephen Harper's Conservatives in the midst of the current federal election campaign could undermine the province's aggressive pursuit of a major trade agreement between Canada and the European Union, should the Tories form the next government.

“After all the work that's been done on this issue, I expect it to go forward. I think people can make allowances. Everybody wins when you are clear on the issues,” Mr. Charest said yesterday in reference to his government's criticism of various Conservative policies.

Mr. Sarkozy's historic keynote address will be delivered on Oct. 17, only three days after the federal election. It coincides with the opening of the summit of la Francophonie – a body comprised of 55 French-speaking member states and governments, as well as 13 observer states – gathered in Quebec City to witness the closing events marking the city's 400th-anniversary celebrations.

Mr. Sarkozy, who holds the rotating presidency of the European Union, also plans to attend the Canada-EU summit in Montreal, which begins on the same day. The summit is expected to inaugurate transatlantic trade talks aimed at integrating Canada's economy with the 27 member countries of the European Community.

For the past two years, Mr. Charest has been pursuing a free-trade agreement with Europe, working aggressively to eliminate resistance expressed by other provinces and territories.

The pact would allow companies, from both sides of the Atlantic, access to government contracts and public-sector services. It would eliminate tariffs by promoting unrestricted trade in goods, services and investments, while allowing free movement of skilled workers in an open transatlantic market.

In fact, during Mr. Sarkozy's visit, Quebec expects to sign a precedent-setting manpower mobility agreement with France. The pact would allow qualified personnel from various professions working in France or Quebec to move freely between the two jurisdictions without having to pass required qualifying tests.

For Mr. Charest, the manpower mobility agreement with France could set the tone for launching talks on a Canada-EU trade agreement. According to an unreleased study of the proposed deal, bilateral trade and investments would increase by more than \$40-billion a year. The three-day Canada-EU summit also begins on Oct. 17.

“If we continue to persist right up to the day of the meeting, we have a very good chance of launching the negotiations,” Mr. Charest said. “Given the context of an economic slowdown in the United States, this is a significant decision for Canada but especially for Quebec because we are the gateway [to North America] for Europe.”