

TORONTO STAR EDITORIAL: A link with Europe?

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It's not every day that Prime Minister Stephen Harper borrows an idea from Pierre Trudeau. Perhaps once every three decades.

But today, after months of secretive preparations, Harper is belatedly throwing his political weight behind an idea whose time may have finally have come: A Canada-Europe free trade agreement.

Trudeau's quixotic efforts to stir up European interest in a "contractual link" began in 1975. Dubbed the Third Option, it had zero impact at the time because the Europeans were uninterested in Canada's desire for a counterweight to American economic dominance

In subsequent decades, Canada drew even closer to the U.S. with a bilateral free trade pact and then NAFTA, while Europe consistently rebuffed Ottawa's overtures. Now, with the collapse of international trade negotiations, the European Union has reconsidered under prodding from France's Nicolas Sarkozy, who holds the rotating EU presidency and is in Quebec today to kick off the process.

There is good reason for such an agreement, in principle. We are one of only a handful of developed nations lacking privileged trade ties with Europe, our second-biggest commercial partner. With global trade talks stalled and world markets in free fall, Canada is more vulnerable than ever to protectionist impulses.

But negotiations are never easy. The Europeans are wedded to rich agricultural subsidies that handicap Canadian exports. The deal's scope could include the free flow of not just goods and services, but labour and capital. There could be regulatory conflicts with NAFTA. And the provinces would likely have to give up procurement programs favouring local suppliers.

Today's Harper-Sarkozy meeting will set in motion negotiations that could take months to complete. The country - and the opposition parties in Ottawa - will be watching with interest.