

Kocharian Woos Europe

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Armenia's overtures to the EU are seen as new evidence of a growing pro-Western outlook

Regional security and economic cooperation were high on the agenda during President Robert Kocharian's meeting with EU and NATO leaders in Brussels.

Kocharian told officials that an alliance with Armenia could play a vital role in securing European borders as the union expanded to the East.

And Europe's security chiefs responded by urging the Armenian president to bring the Nagorny Karabakh conflict to a swift and peaceful conclusion.

On the eve of his visit, Kocharian told the Mediamax news agency, "In the context of our European outlook, there are two areas which should be highlighted. Firstly, we recognise that European integration is an irreversible process. Secondly, Armenia identifies with Europe and is searching for a place and a role within the European architecture."

With Europe expanding to the East, said Kocharian, relations between the EU and the nations of the Black Sea region were taking on a growing significance.

"Stability and peace in this region are becoming vital factors in guaranteeing the security and development of the whole of Europe," he added.

During the Brussels meeting, Romano Prodi, president of the European Commission, called for Armenia to enter into economic cooperation with Azerbaijan - moves which have so far been rejected by Baku.

"Economic cooperation is the primary step for normalising relations in your region. I hope that this will be done," said Prodi. It was an issue highlighted by Anna Lund, Sweden's interior minister, during a visit to the South Caucasus earlier this year.

The Nagorny Karabakh problem took centre stage during Kocharian's meeting with NATO general secretary George Robertson who said that regional security in the South Caucasus depended largely on the resolution of the conflict.

"I hope that the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan will be able to find a solution which satisfies both countries," he said.

Robertson went on to describe Armenia as "a valuable partner for NATO" - in sharp contrast to other NATO officials who have previously criticised Armenia's largely passive cooperation with the alliance.

After the meeting, Kocharian commented, "We are ready to enter into a more active cooperation with NATO in the framework of the Partnership for Peace programme."

Kocharian has been eager to promote Armenia's conciliatory stance in the South Caucasus. "Armenia aims to build mutually acceptable relations with the other countries in the region and with all interested parties," he told the Mediamax news agency.

During the Brussels meetings, he informed George Robertson of conclusions drawn by the Treaty on Collective Security summit, held in Yerevan between May 24 and 25.

But the Armenian president remained defensive over the presence of Russian military bases in the former Soviet republic. "There are US military bases in Turkey but no one says that the independence of the Turkish state is compromised," he said.

Kocharian commented that Russia's military presence had a stabilising influence in the region. "The base gives our people a greater sense of security," he said, alluding to strained relations with Turkey.

Javier Solana, general secretary of the EU council, told reporters at a joint press conference with Kocharian that the European Union was eager to help smooth relations between the neighbouring states.

And, following his meetings with Romano Prodi, the president announced that Armenia was working to secure EU backing for a regional information and technology centre in Yerevan. The city would also host a large-scale regional conference on information exchange this October.

After making his overtures to Europe, Kocharian returned to Yerevan to meet with Russian Duma speaker Gennady Seleznev who reiterated an open invitation for Armenia to join the proposed union between Russia and Belarus.

However, Kocharian said that relations between Armenia and these two countries would remain on a high level and Armenia had little to gain by entering the union.

Kocharian's critics in both Armenia and Russia have seen the president's recent visit to Brussels as the latest manifestation of his pro-Western outlook. And yet Kocharian insists that Armenian-Russian relations are still strong, even if their mood is more pragmatic and business-like.

But he admitted, "The worst thing we can do is to view ourselves as a 'branch' of another country in this region. If this is the case, other countries - including Russia - will swiftly lose their respect for us."

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