

U.S. and Georgia Hold Joint Military Drills in Move Likely to Rile Russia

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U.S. servicemen attend an official opening ceremony of the joint U.S.-Georgian exercise Noble Partner 2015 at the Vaziani training area outside Tbilisi. May 11, 2015.

TBILISI — U.S. and Georgian forces have started two weeks of military exercises in the South Caucasian republic, a move that is likely to irritate Georgia's former Soviet master Russia.

About 600 U.S. and Georgian soldiers were taking part in the maneuvers, for which the U.S. army for the first time transported an entire mechanized company, including 14 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles, across the Black Sea from Bulgaria.

"This represents a big step in our training and a big step in our interoperability," Brigadier General Mark Loeben, director of exercises at U.S. European Command, told reporters on Monday.

Georgia has U.S. backing for its bid to join the Western NATO alliance. But the move is firmly opposed by Russia, which fought a five-day war with Georgia in 2008 and supports separatist authorities in two Georgian breakaway regions: Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The exercises are based at the Vaziani military base near the capital Tbilisi, which was a Russian air force base until Russian forces withdrew at the start of the last decade under a European arms reduction agreement.

Defense Minister Tina Khidasheli said Georgia was "not preparing for war with anybody."

"This is not against anybody. We are preparing for peace," she told reporters. "That's why we need to have a Georgian army that is strong, capable, and proud of defending and protecting freedom and independence of this country."

Russia, which plans to hold naval drills with China shortly in the Mediterranean, did not offer any immediate reaction to the Georgian exercises.

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