

War Preparations? U.S. Warship Arrives in Georgia for Joint Training

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TBILISI — A U.S. frigate has arrived in Georgia's territorial waters to take part in joint Theater Security Cooperation (TSC) exercises with the Georgian Coast Guard, a Georgian official said on Wednesday.

USS John L. Hall, an Oliver Perry class guided missile frigate, docked on Wednesday in the port of Poti, some 50 km (31 miles) from the border with the former Georgian republic of Abkhazia.

The frigate will visit Batumi, another Georgian port on the Black Sea coast, on April 16 and leave Georgia's territorial waters on April 19.

During the visit, John L. Hall's crew will conduct multiple training sessions with the Georgian Coast Guard including first aid, damage control, search and rescue (SAR), rescue and assistance (R&A), and visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS) tactics.

Georgia, which is actively seeking NATO membership, signed in January last year a strategic partnership treaty with the United States, which has long provided economic and military support for Tbilisi, including training for its troops. The John L. Hall took part in similar exercises with the Georgian Coast Guard in March.

President Mikheil Saakashvili pledged to build new and stronger armed forces after Georgia's military conflict with Russia in August 2008. He has expressed hope that Washington will provide stronger support to Tbilisi in developing its military.

Some Georgian politicians have urged the U.S. and NATO to send their warships to Georgian territorial waters in the Black Sea to stave off the potential threat of a Russian sea blockade of the Georgian ports in case of a military conflict.

Russia maintains several patrol boats in the area to help Abkhazia guard its maritime border in the Black Sea.

Under mutual assistance treaties signed in November 2008 following Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and the other former Georgian republic of South Ossetia as independent states, Moscow pledged to help both republics protect their borders, and the signatories granted each other the right to set up military bases in their respective territories.

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