

Russia to send warship through Panama Canal

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PANAMA CITY, Panama – Russia said Wednesday it is sending a warship through the Panama Canal for the first time since World War II, a short journey loaded with symbolic weight: the destroyer will dock at a former U.S. naval base, showcasing Russia's growing influence in the region.

Russia appears to be relishing the idea of stopping at what was long a symbol of U.S. global power; the Russian Navy announced it would visit "the Rodman naval base" — a name that the host nation, Panama has not used since taking over the base from the United States in 1999.

The destroyer Admiral Chabanenko is scheduled to enter the Panama Canal on Friday morning and arrive late in the day at what Panama calls the Balboa Naval Base.

"It is a sort of tit-for-tat for Russia's perception of U.S. meddling in Georgia, Ukraine and Eastern Europe," and has little military purpose, said Adam Isacson, an analyst for the Washington-based Center for International Policy.

Russia, like the United States, already has ports with access to both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

"Sending a destroyer through the Panama canal obviously has a lot of symbolic significance (and) this is primarily symbolism," said analyst Michael Shifter of the Inter-American Dialogue think tank in Washington

U.S. officials have expressed no concern over the visit — continuing a stance they took when the ship earlier participated in joint exercises with Venezuela's navy, which concluded Monday.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who campaigns against U.S. influence in the hemisphere, invited the Admiral Chabanenko and the nuclear-powered missile cruiser Peter the Great to join the exercises, adding to his growing military ties with the Kremlin.

Panamanian authorities said they would treat the Admiral Chabanenko as just another toll-paying ship, and the calm surrounding the visit is a sign of how far the country has come since it served as a Cold War bastion studded with U.S. military bases when the Canal Zone was U.S. control.

The canal was a symbol of America's growing global reach when it opened in 1914, and it was a major military outpost for generations. The 10-mile-wide, 51-mile-long strip along the canal was considered U.S. territory — a fact that allowed Canal Zone native John McCain to run for the U.S. presidency.

Panama is carrying out a multibillion dollar project to widen the waterway to accommodate bigger ships, and it sees the former U.S. bases as a tourist draw: the nearby Fort Amador is better known locally these days for its seafood restaurants than its military past.

"This isn't the moment where I think the (U.S.) conservatives will get too alarmed," said Shifter. "Perhaps if they had done it even a couple of months ago there would have been more concern, in the context of the Georgia crisis when oil prices hadn't dropped they way they have. Russia is now seen as sort of a weaker position than they were before."

Some U.S. conservatives tried to block or delay the canal hand-over in 1999, arguing that growing operations by a Hong Kong-based ports company would lead to a Chinese takeover of the waterway.

"Obviously, they've been proved to be wrong," Shifter said. "I think the Panamanians have demonstrated that they're perfectly able to run the canal very well; it's been very well managed and there's absolutely no concern" about foreign control.

Even the U.S. government is sanguine about the Russian ship.

"We have no interest in reviving Cold War images and rhetoric. We and the region have left this behind us and no longer see our relationships with other countries through the Cold War lens," said a U.S. State Department official who was not authorized to be quoted by name.

"We are looking for ways to enhance mutual cooperation in the Americas, and see a constructive role for Russia" in the process, he said.

But the presence of the Russian warship still has resonance for some in Panama, which was dominated by the United States for nearly a century, and which underwent a U.S. invasion in 1989 that ousted dictator Manuel Noriega.

President Martin Torrijos is the son of military strongman Omar Torrijos, who negotiated the return of the canal to Panama's control in the 1970s with former president Jimmy Carter. For Panamanians, the Russian "shows 'we're not under Uncle Sam's domination anymore,'" Isacson said.

Mario Rognoni, an adviser to ruling-party presidential candidate Balbina Herrera, said the Russian visit "demonstrates how times have changed, and the neutrality we have shown in operating the canal."