

Russia to renovate Syrian port

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BEIRUT, Lebanon (AP) - Russia said yesterday it was renovating a Syrian port for use by the Russian fleet, signaling an effort to establish a firmer foothold in the Mediterranean at a time of tensions with the United States over Georgia.

Syria was Moscow's strongest Mideast ally during the Cold War. The alliance largely waned after the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, though Russia has continued some weapons sales to Damascus.

But Syrian President Bashar Assad has increasingly reached out to Russia recently, including seeking weapons and offering broader military cooperation.

Yesterday's announcement was the first tangible sign of any new cooperation. The Itar-Tass news agency reported a vessel from Russia's Black Sea fleet had begun restoring facilities at Syria's Mediterranean port of Tartus for use by the Russian military.

The two countries' naval chiefs also met in Moscow yesterday and discussed "further strengthening mutual trust and mutual understanding between the two states' fleets," a Russian naval official, Igor Dygalo, told Itar-Tass.

The Tartus renovations could signal an intention to have a long-term Russian naval presence there.

In late August, Russia's ambassador to Damascus, Igor Belyev, said Russian ships were already patrolling the area, but "a new development is that the Russian presence in the Mediterranean will become permanent."

The Russian navy's closest access to the Mediterranean is through the Black Sea, where they have a strong naval presence.

That area has seen an increase in NATO naval activity after the Georgia conflict, prompting Russian complaints that NATO has exceeded ship numbers permitted in the Black Sea under international agreements.

The move comes at a time of heightened tensions between the United States and Russia after last month's brief war in Georgia. The rift has raised concerns Moscow might start reaching out to U.S. rivals around the world to beef up military alliances.

Russian bombers this month arrived in Venezuela for training exercises and the two countries are to hold joint exercises in the Caribbean in November.

In Moscow, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said yesterday that Russia would build economic and military ties with nations willing to do so even if the West dislikes some of these alliances.

Russian military experts said Tartus would be a considerable boost for Russian operations in the Mediterranean.

The former Soviet Union had a maintenance and supply facility in Tartus under a 1971 agreement with Damascus, but the deal ended with the fall of the Communist regime in Moscow.

Currently, the maintenance and supply facility at Tartus consists of three floating piers one of which is currently operational one floating repair shop, warehouses, barracks and other facilities, according to Russian press reports.

The Tartus move might be as much aimed at placating Syria's appeals for greater cooperation.

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