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<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-exercises-idUSKCN0Y21RP>

Georgia begins U.S.-led military exercise, angering Russia

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The Georgian army began two weeks of military exercises with the United States and Britain on Wednesday, drawing an angry response from former Soviet master Russia which called the war games "a provocative step".

About 650 soldiers from the United States, 150 from Britain and 500 from Georgia were taking part in the maneuvers, with Washington dispatching an entire mechanized company including eight Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and, for the first time, eight M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks.

Georgia's Defence Minister Tina Khidasheli said the drills were an important event for the South Caucasus republic.

"This is one of the biggest exercises that our country has ever hosted, this is the biggest number of troops on the ground, and the largest concentration of military equipment," Khidasheli told Reuters.

But the exercises went down badly in Moscow where the Russian Foreign Ministry last week warned they could destabilize the region, a charge denied by Georgian officials.

"These exercises are not directed against anyone. There is no trace of provocation," Georgia's Prime Minister Georgy Kvirikashvili said in a statement.

Russia defeated Georgia in a short war in 2008 over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia, and Moscow continues to garrison troops there and to support another breakaway region, Abkhazia.

The exercises were run out of the Vaziani military base near Georgia's capital Tbilisi.

Russian forces used to be based there until they withdrew at the start of the last decade under the terms of a European arms reduction agreement.

"The importance of these exercises is to improve interoperability between Georgia, the United States and the United Kingdom. ... It enables us to prepare Georgia's contribution to a NATO response force," Colonel Jeffrey Dickerson, the U.S. director of the exercises, told Reuters.

The United States has spoken favorably of the idea that Georgia might one day join NATO, something Russia firmly opposes.