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Related Categories: Central Asia; Iran; Russia

[With this issue of the Eurasia Security Watch, we change both editors and scope. Our sincere thanks go to outgoing editor Jeff Smith for his longtime stewardship of the Eurasia Security Watch. He is replaced as editor by AFPC Vice President Ilan Berman. Additionally, after extensive coverage of the Middle East, we shift our focus back to the geographic region of Eurasia: the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus that cumulatively make up the "post-Soviet space." We hope that you enjoy these changes, and thank you for your continued readership.]

IRAN'S EXPANDING EURASIAN HORIZONS

Eurasia's most important security bloc may soon boast a new member. In the wake of the new nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 nations, the institutional constraints on the Islamic Republic's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have been removed, paving the way for Tehran to be adopted by the group as a full partner. The six-member bloc, which is dominated by Moscow and Beijing, allowed Iran to join as an observer nation several years ago. But deeper engagement - including security coordination with the bloc's members (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) - has so far been proscribed by the organization's bylaws, which prohibit any country under UN sanctions to become a full member.

Those relevant restrictions have now been lifted, and SCO officials are viewing Iran in a new light. "The organization wishes success to Iran in the finalization of efforts related to the nuclear program so that the essential legal procedures leading up to the lifting of sanctions were implemented as soon as possible," SCO Secretary General Dmitry Mezentsev has said. "I'd like to believe the SCO will take up Iran's request for the status of a full member immediately after that."

Iranian officials, for their part, are eager for the opportunity. "The lifting of sanctions opens for Iran the opportunity to become a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and eliminates other limitations, which the Islamic Republic has been facing in the regional foreign policy," a spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry has confirmed. (Eurasianet, January 18, 2016)

IN TURKMENISTAN, THE CONSTITUTIONAL FIX IS IN

As preparations for next year's presidential elections heat up, Turkmenistan's leader is laying the groundwork for a longer term in office. The government of President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, who has already been in office for nine years, has launched a "public discussion" over the possibility of amendments to the country's constitution - amendments that, among other things, would allow Berdimukhammedov to remain in his post for longer, perhaps considerably so. (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 15, 2016)

CENTRAL ASIA FEELS RUSSIA'S ECONOMIC PAIN

Russia's worsening economic fortunes are beginning to be felt by its neighbors. On January 22nd, Kyrgyzstan officially called off a major energy deal with their biggest trading partner (and fellow Eurasian Economic Union member). Moscow had previously negotiated deals to build a cascade of hydropower plants in the Central Asian republic, but numerous delays and the slow pace of loan disbursements from the Kremlin have forced the government of Almazbek Atambayev in Bishkek to annul the plans.

Kyrgyzstan, moreover, is not an isolated case. As expanding Western sanctions and low global oil prices have buffeted the Russian economy, the Kremlin is beginning to rethink its development plans for Central Asia writ large. The most visible sign of this is Russia's dwindling investment budget for the region; the country's deputy finance minister, Sergei Storchak, has already announced that Russia does not plan on offering new foreign lending to countries in its periphery in 2016. (Hong Kong *Asia Times*, January 25, 2016)