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IRAN STUMBLES IN SCO BID

The Islamic Republic has fallen short in its efforts to become a full-fledged member of Eurasia's most significant security bloc. China has reportedly rebuffed Iran's latest bid to upgrade its status from observer to full member in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or SCO - a six-nation security grouping jointly led by Moscow and Beijing. The rejection was due to "technical nuances" rather than "principle," Bakhtiyor Khakimov, Russia's envoy to the SCO, has reassured reporters. Nevertheless, it highlights a political disagreement between China and Russia, which is said to have lobbied vocally for Iran's inclusion, now that Western sanctions have been lifted in the wake of last summer's nuclear deal. China, by contrast, has taken a more cautious approach to Iran's reintegration into the global community, and has prioritized consideration of India and Pakistan - also observer nations of the SCO - for full membership instead. (Reuters, June 23, 2016)

TURKMENISTAN TAKES SIDES

Ashgabat appears to be loosening its historic policy of regional neutrality as a result of the deepening conflict in Afghanistan. In recent weeks, pro-Kabul security operatives and even Russia's Defense Minister have made treks to the Central Asian state to lobby for a more active role against the resurgent Taliban movement from the government of President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov. The appeals seem to have worked; a flurry of military activity within the country, coupled with an unprecedented decision to purchase Russian weapons and host Russian trainers, suggests that the Central Asian state is now in the process of abandoning its longstanding stance of "positive neutrality" in favor of a more active role in stabilizing neighboring Afghanistan - or at least better securing the common border between the two countries. (*Radio Free Europe*, June 23, 2016)

PUSHING BACK AGAINST KYRGYZSTAN'S NEW MEDIA LAW

A controversial new media law in Kyrgyzstan is creating a political firestorm. The proposed legislation, which was put forth by deputies in the country's parliament in May and "would ban foreigners from setting up media outlets and restrict the proportion of non-local funding for news organizations to 20 percent," is ostensibly designed to bolster "information security" in the former Soviet republic. But civil society activists are crying foul. On June 21, a public roundtable in Bishkek criticized the measure as an official attempt to restrict free speech. Participants (who included journalists, media experts and activists) noted that the law, similar to regulations recently enacted in Russia, would limit plurality in the country's media - effectively tightening the government's control over television and radio content, and allowing Bishkek to silence extraneous voices. (Eurasianet, May 16, 2016; *Radio Free Europe*, June 21, 2016)

GEORGIA IN THE BALANCE

In recent years, the former Soviet republic of Georgia has followed a consistently pro-Western foreign policy line. But, after nearly a decade of frustrating deliberations with Washington and European capitals over its place in the West, Tbilisi could soon find itself headed back into Russia's geopolitical orbit. A particular topic of discord has been Georgia's so-far-thwarted bid to become a member of NATO - a role the country sees as a needed insurance policy against Moscow, and an affirmation of its pro-Western political trajectory. Alliance member states, however, have been slow to reciprocate Tbilisi's advances, and have failed to give Georgia a concrete timetable for NATO accession, in part because of the uncertain status of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and partially for fear that doing so might anger Russia. This makes NATO's upcoming summit in Poland something of a make-or-break moment for Georgia's relationship with the West - and for the credibility of the country's elites, which previously had promised rapid integration into the Atlantic Alliance. (Reuters, July 7, 2016)