2009-12

The ISCIP Analyst, Volume XVI, Issue 6

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/11874

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Russian Federation: Executive Branch
By Susan Cavan

Disposition of forces
“Don’t hold your breath,” Putin remarked in answer to a straightforward query about possible plans to leave politics. During his televised “town meeting” on 3 December, Putin deftly fielded carefully vetted questions from the Russian public, addressing economic issues and the measures his government continues to roll out in order to ease the social impact of the crisis and of new terrorist attacks, as well as the inevitable questions about his political future. (1) When asked specifically about another run for the presidency, Putin avoided his Valdai reference to sorting out plans with Medvedev and left the decision in his own hands: "I will think about it, there is still enough time." (2) This time, Medvedev did not wait for the significance of Putin’s comments to create a sense of inevitability in his return. "If Putin doesn't rule out running, neither do I rule myself out," Medvedev responded from Rome. (3)

Whatever the contours of the initial decisions made in 2007 and 2008 as “Project Succession” developed in the Kremlin, there are suspicions now that Medvedev might no longer be so willing to step aside, should Putin decide to reassume the presidency.

In retrospect, many of President Medvedev’s actions in 2009 appear to be advance work for a project now being titled “Modernization,” but perhaps they would be more accurately described as Medvedev’s drive for independence…as president. Despite his apparently constrained ability to act with the full powers of the presidency, Medvedev does seem to be signaling a willingness to branch out
from the two-headed strategy of Russia’s diarchy to build momentum for a new phase of political development.

The onset of economic crisis in the fall of 2008 presented Prime Minister Putin with a cascading set of financial issues, each potentially capable of spinning off episodes of social unrest. While serious economic questions (including the distribution of Russia’s own “bail-out” funds with its consequent need to assist the publicly despised oligarchs), have kept Putin occupied, he cannot be insensitive to the scope of changes snowballing out from the Kremlin. It is clear that should Putin decide to reassert himself, as he did only rhetorically with the Valdai Club, he could diminish Medvedev’s authority in the Russian state, as easily as he might win back the presidency.

Repeatedly this year, analysts have gazed at poll numbers meant to reflect genuine levels of support throughout Russia for the prime minister and president—both ratings highly positive with only occasional moments of slippage—despite the groaning economic slump and the re-emergence of terrorism in the northern Caucasus. A clash between Russia’s two political heavy weights, however, might produce unexpected, even uncontrollable, events. Nonetheless, a low-level scuffle for control of key institutions, resources, and the authority to act independently is not without its merits and could force changes to the system that might benefit either side of the tandem.

President Medvedev chose significant, even Leninist, avenues on which to demonstrate his independence. First, the ideological underpinnings of the Putin era were redefined: Igor Yurgens, the Director of Russia's Institute for Contemporary Development's Management Board, which boasts President Medvedev as Chair of the Board of Directors, gave voice to a Russian social contract theory in the time of economic crisis: “The social contract consisted of limiting of civil rights in exchange for economic well-being,” … “At the current
moment, economic well-being is shrinking. Correspondingly, civil rights should expand. It’s just simple logic.” (4)

While the theory had its immediate detractors, Medvedev returned to the subject during a wide-ranging interview with Novaya gazeta editor, Dmitri Muratov. Novaya gazeta had remained a harsh critic of the Putin regime, unlike many of its print and electronic rivals, and its masthead bears the names of its journalists who have been killed, most presumably for the reports they wrote or investigated. Medvedev’s decision to speak with Muratov sent its own signal – possibly a coy wooing of the media, even the critical elements. When asked by Muratov about his thoughts on the social contract, Medvedev suggested a “modernization” of the social contract that would allow both freedom and prosperity. (5)

Medvedev also began a project to identify top candidates to enter government service – the development of his own cadres, specifically distinct from Putin’s civil servants. The Golden 100 project developed from an ukaz on cadre management first promulgated in the summer of 2008, and its intention is to reinvigorate state bureaucratic structures by creating a list of “reserves” or individuals vetted by a team of advisers to serve in the state apparat. (6)

Institutionally, the Security Council seemed to gain in prominence this year, as the president, prime minister and heads of the power organs met regularly to discuss a new security concept, foreign policy initiatives, and incidents of domestic terrorism. As usual, the scope of Security Council authority remains shrouded behind one and two line announcements of its activities, while occasional leaks confirm that the president and prime minister confer on joint policy planning and receive advisory reports at its sessions.

Ironically, it was not security issues but electoral miscues that might have done the most damage to harmonious diarchical relations this year. The fraudulent ballot handling involved in the October regional elections and the subsequent
walk-out by Duma opposition party members served to embarrass United Russia, the party of power, and of Putin. Worse yet, it demonstrated publicly the tenuous failings of Russian democracy in a public humiliation that may yet have consequences in future elections.

For United Russia, Medvedev, after some public hemming, eventually provided a scolding, in which he strongly suggested that central elites keep an eye on “overenthusiastic” supporters in the regions: “This year, together we took important decisions designed to modernise our country’s political system. Now I would like to once again thank all members of United Russia who supported my proposals. I expect the same support in further work on developing democratic institutions at the regional level. … Unfortunately we have to admit openly that some regional representatives of both United Russia and other parties are guilty of this. They occasionally show signs of a retrograde mentality and reduce political activity to intrigue and games. Elections are intended to be an expression of the popular will, a contest of ideas and programmes, but as a result they sometimes turn into exercises in which democratic procedures are confused with administrative ones. We must simply get rid of these people and at the same time these bad political habits as well.” (7)

In November, President Medvedev made clear his intentions to “Move Forward” with a modernization plan for Russia, as elucidated in his Address to the Federal Assembly: “Instead of an archaic society in which the leaders think and decide for everyone we will become a society of clever, free and responsible people. Instead of chaotic action dictated by nostalgia and prejudice, we will carry out an intelligent domestic and foreign policy based on purely pragmatic aims. Instead of the Russia of the past we will build the Russia of the present – a modern and forward-looking young nation able to take a worthy place in the global economy.” (8)
There have been seemingly boundless rumors of apparatchiki struggles this year, as the siloviki around Putin have found themselves mired in economic crisis management. Medvedev’s more natural milieu, the St. Petersburg intellectuals—lawyers and economists—have been immersed in issues of judicial reform and rooting out bureaucratic corruption. At the same time, it appears a new battleground is breaking over control of Russia’s police. The MVD, a power organ all but subsumed into the FSB under Putin, appears battered by recent and consistent allegations of police corruption and abuse. According to Viktor Ilyukhin, the Deputy Chairman of the Duma Committee for Constitutional Legislation, “I’m stone-cold confident that it [recent criticism of the MVD] all comes down to Nurgaliyev’s job. Some faction in the corridors of power is resolved to promote its own man there…. ” (9)

A putative battle between the apparatchik supporters of president and prime minister could produce a significant number of victims, and depending on its duration, inflict serious damage on Russia’s economic, social and political prospects. According to Andrei Ryabov from the Moscow Carnegie Center, the authorities are playing with fire when they involve the security services too deeply in political games and end up causing a “gradual delegitimization” of the power organs. “What baffles me is the position of the highest echelons of state power. … Either they are 100% sure that everything is under control or they are just too stupid – or arrogant for that matter – to consider consequences. That reorganization of security structures, not just the Interior Ministry alone, is long over due is clear. These structures became a colossal repressive machine. Time to reinstall their initial function, that of protection of the population rather than protection of the state from the people.” (10)

Perhaps 2009 will be seen in retrospect as a sort of staging platform, as ideas for reform and renovation of the Russian political system joined with personal and bureaucratic ambitions to create a new structure that resolves the tensions of tandem authority. Perhaps.
Putin’s broadcast performance and his answers to the carefully chosen questions on his political future leave many questions unresolved. For some, it appears as another act in a long written drama of Russian politics. As Kremlin analyst Olga Kryshtanovskaya noted, "I think it was decided in 2007, when strategy was being planned. … I think it was decided that Putin should not seek a third consecutive term, but that after four years he could return to the presidency." (11) Perhaps that was the plan, but perhaps the plan has changed.

Source Notes:
(2) Ibid.
(3) Ibid.
(6) "A list of the first hundred members of the high-potential managerial pool, selected under the auspices of the Russian President, has been announced...,” 17 Feb 09, the Kremlin website, http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/sdocs/news.shtml via The ISCIP Analyst, "Crisis management, cadre lists, and the Security Council,” by Susan J. Cavan, Vol. XV, No. 8, 19 Feb 09.
Putin’s “missing” tiger hints at real conservation issues in Russia

Avid outdoorsman and recreational hunter Vladimir Putin made headlines in Fall 2008 when he “saved” a group of journalists and scientists from an attack by an angry Amur tiger. The Prime Minister was visiting Ussuri national park in order to observe as researchers from the Russian Academy of Sciences outfitted the tiger with equipment to monitor its health and migration routes, when the animal slipped free of its restraints. The Prime Minister saw the animal charge the group, grabbed a weapon, and shot it with a tranquilizer dart in an act that was widely publicized around the country. (1) A month later Putin received a Siberian tiger cub for his birthday and kept it in a wicker basket at his Moscow home for months, before sending it to a zoo. (2) Putin lent his support to efforts aimed at helping raise worldwide awareness of Russia’s dwindling Siberian tiger population.
Until recently, the campaign had been considered a success. As tiger populations continue to fall around the world, the relative stability of the Amur tigers, which nearly went extinct during the 1940s after decades of illegal poaching and the steady erosion of their natural habitat, had been hailed as an example for other countries. In addition to strict anti-poaching laws, the Russian government created protected habitats for the tigers in the Amur-Ussuri region of Primorsky Krai and Khabarovsk Krai in far eastern Siberia. These habitats span more than a million acres in the form of two protected zones and three national parks. (3) Last week, however, Putin’s movement to save the Amur tigers suffered a setback when the Wildlife Conservation Society, a New York-based advocacy group, released a report estimating that the tiger population actually has declined by 40 percent since 1997 and that after a year that saw a serious decline in population in all five protected zones, only approximately 300 remain in the wild. The same report alleged that the tracking collar placed on the tiger Putin tranquilized had been silent since mid-September. (4) A spokesman from Russia’s World Wildlife Fund (WWF) cautioned against assuming the worst, claiming that the silence simply could be due to a missing or broken collar or dead batteries, but added that the tiger may have fallen victim to poachers. Nevertheless, these reports have left many to conclude that the tigers are no safer than they were a decade ago.

Poaching may be the least of Russia’s environmental concerns. A January 1999 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) predicted that the Russian government would be “unable to deal effectively with the formidable environmental challenges posed by decades of Soviet and post-Soviet environmental mismanagement and recurring economic crises.” The report also noted that water and air pollution, along with nuclear and other forms of hazardous waste all would contribute to a decline in the overall quality of life and that dangerous levels of toxins could potentially reduce the ability of Russia’s workforce to function effectively. (5) These predictions may have proven correct. The Dnieper River, which originates in Russia and flows through Ukraine to the Black Sea, runs through a heavily
polluted Ukraine that remains shrouded in “black and orange exhaust from a metallurgical plant” and burning garbage fumes and fields of radioactive waste. Tests of one tributary found traces of caesium-137 left over from the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. By comparison, the Danube River, which was similarly polluted in 1989, has since rebounded thanks to a fifteen-year, $3.5 billion cleanup effort that included construction of waste treatment plants and wetlands restoration. (6)

The story of these two rivers is indicative of a larger pattern of post-Soviet environmental restoration by Europe and neglect by Russia and other former Soviet states, despite European Union attempts to build on their shared “legacy of environmental problems from the past, as well as new pressures as they return to economic growth” through the Partnership and Co-operation Agreements (PCA) and the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument. The PCA expired in 2007 and has yet to be updated or replaced. A EU-Russia Environmental Dialogue signed in October 2006 similarly has failed to produce tangible results. (7) As the authors of the NIE commented more than a decade ago, environmental progress in Russia will depend not on foreign pressure, but on the ability of the country’s leaders to make it a priority. (8) With the economy and national security continuing to dominate the domestic agenda, it is doubtful that this will happen anytime in the near future.

In the meantime, the Kremlin will continue its environmental focus, such as it is, on the Siberian tiger. The Prime Minister’s spokesman issued a formal denial within hours of the Wildlife Conservation Society’s report. Dmitry Peskov claimed that the batteries had run down, but that scientists had replaced the collar a week earlier. Peskov further revealed that the tiger had given birth and that the cub also had been tagged. Peskov announced that the tracking system would be updated in order to enable constant tracking. The Kremlin denied the rest of the Wildlife Conservation Society’s claims as well, admitting only that the Amur tiger population may have decreased, but not by the reported amount. Vladimir Krever
of Russia’s WWF blamed “deep snow in the last two years” for “limit[ing] the tigers’ ability to roam, making it harder to count them.” (9)

For all that Putin has done to bring the Siberian tiger back to prominence in Russia, including the habitat reforms and less sustentative efforts that include designating the animal as the symbol of the 2012 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Vladivostok, (10) planning a ‘tiger summit’ in September 2010 in order to set an international agenda for raising the number of tigers worldwide to 6,500 by 2022, (11) and referring to the Siberian tiger as Russia’s calling card, the country’s environmental workers say that there is more that must be done to save them. The head of Russia’s WWF called the Wildlife Conservation Society’s report “a wake-up call that current conservation efforts are not going far enough” and blamed logging and infrastructure development for a serious decline in the tigers’ habitat and resources. The most serious threat to the tigers, however, is still poaching. In the wake of the financial crisis, the federal government reduced the funding for programs dedicated to discouraging those who seek to sell tiger meat and bones in Asia and pelts in Russia. There is also no substantive penalty for those caught in the act. According to Russia’s WWF, poachers are only fined 1,000 rubles (US $35). (12) Putin’s project might be a good start, but unless these serious issues are recognized and something changes, the Amur tigers may be running out of time.

Source Notes:
(4) Ibid.
(8) “The Environmental Outlook in Russia,” Ibid.
(10) “Putin sends Siberian tiger cub to south Russia zoo,” Ibid.
(11) Tony Halpin, “Vladimir Putin’s endangered tiger is missing, despite satellite collar,” The Times, 26 Nov 09 via http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article6932008.ece. Last accessed 29 Nov 09.
(12) “Amur Tigers May Again Be on the Decline in Russia,” Ibid.

Russian Federation: Legal Issues
By Sergei Tokmakov

Judges extend death penalty ban
The Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation on Thursday extended a 13-year-old moratorium on capital punishment. In its decision, the Court confirmed that Russia’s international treaty obligations are an integral part of domestic law. (1)

The moratorium was established de facto on May 16, 1996, when then-President Boris Yeltsin issued Decree ? 724 "For gradual reduction of the application of the death penalty in conjunction with Russia's entry into the Council of Europe." (2) Abolition of the death penalty is one of the absolute requirements for all members of the Council of Europe. The Council has demonstrated that it would accept a moratorium, at least as a temporary measure preceding abolition.

On April 16, 1997, Russia legally bound itself to abolish the death penalty, when it signed (but did not ratify) Protocol ? 6 to the European Convention on Human Rights. Today, Russia remains the last one of the 47 members of the Council of Europe not to have ratified the Protocol. (3)

According to Article 20 of the Russian Constitution, death sentence cases require a jury trial. (4) In February, 1999, the Constitutional Court issued a temporary stay on all executions until jury trials had been instituted in all regions of the Russian Federation. Jury trials now have been established in all but one of Russia’s region. On January 1, 2011, Chechnya will become the final Russian region to establish jury trials, potentially causing the moratorium to expire on that date. (5)

Despite the moratorium, the current Russian Penal Code warrants the death penalty for five crimes: aggravated murder (section 105.2); attempted murder of a government or public official (section 277); attempted murder of a person carrying out justice or a preliminary investigation (section 295); attempted murder of a law enforcement officer (section 317); genocide (section 357). (6) Each of the five crimes can be punished by death, life imprisonment or incarceration for a
minimum term of eight or twelve (depending on the crime) and a maximum of twenty years. The death penalty is carried out by a pistol shot to the back of the head. Only males between the ages of 18-65 are eligible. The body cannot be released to the family and the place of burial cannot be disclosed. (7)

The Supreme Court of the Russian Federation asked the Constitutional Court to clarify the status of the capital punishment issue before the key impediment to its reinstatement is removed on January 1, 2011 by the establishment of the jury trials in Chechnya. (8)

Various ways of resolving the issue were considered at the plenary hearings that started on November 9, 2009. Legally, the Constitutional Court has the power to uphold or repeal the death penalty laws, or to extend the moratorium. The death penalty laws cannot be upheld if Russia continues to be in the process of ratification of Protocol ? 6 because, according to the Russian Constitution, international treaty obligations take precedence over domestic laws. During the Constitutional Court hearings on the issue, representatives of the Duma, Council of Federation, and the Government confirmed that Russia continues to be in the ratification process. Therefore, Russia is still legally bound to abstain from actions that contradict the Protocol and must (eventually) ratify the Protocol and eliminate the death penalty, which requires changing the current law. (9)

The Russian Constitution prescribes several ways of invalidating a federal law. Ratification of an international treaty triggers the presumption of invalidity of a contradicting domestic law. The legislature also can repeal its own laws. Finally, the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation can declare certain provisions invalid. The Constitutional Court decision on the issue is final and cannot be appealed. (10)

The first hearing, on November 9, lasted several hours, and nobody voiced support for reinstating the death penalty. “The death penalty will be phased out in
the next few years,” said Duma representative Alexander Kharitonov. Nevertheless, Duma speaker Boris Gryzlov indicated that the Duma is not yet ready to ratify the Protocol, due to the absence of a public consensus on the issue - polls show that most Russians support the death penalty. (11) Given the Duma’s lack of commitment to abolishing capital punishment, it is unlikely at this stage that its members will amend the criminal laws to exclude the death penalty. Nevertheless, the Constitutional Court decided not to repeal the law outright, which is traditionally the legislature’s prerogative, and opted to extend the moratorium instead.

The Court based its decision on the constitutional provision that the death penalty is a “temporary and exceptional” form of punishment. Furthermore, the constitutionally-guaranteed right to life (and, therefore, right not to be executed) is qualified by the provisions of the international treaties to which Russia has assented and which are, therefore, part of its domestic jurisprudence. (12)

The recent ruling explicitly states Russia’s intent to continue recognition of the norms of international law and incorporate them into the Russian legal system. The Council of Europe has expressed hope that Russia will not reinstate the death penalty. (13) The Council’s position on the issue clearly played a major role in the Court’s decision. The Court noted in its ruling that abolition of capital punishment was one of the material terms and obligations undertaken by Russia as a condition of its entry into European Union. Therefore, Russia cannot sentence criminals to death or execute such sentences unless the country is ready to renounce its support of Protocol ? 6. Since September, 1996, 681 convicted criminals have not been subject to execution. (14)

Former Constitutional Court Chairman Vladimir Tumanov, stated that abolition of the death penalty would be a necessary step if Russia was to evolve in the spirit of its Constitution, while reinstating the death penalty could result in Russia’s expulsion from the Council of Europe. On numerous occasions the Council of
Europe has asked Russian authorities not only to abstain from executing criminals, but to repeal the capital punishment laws. (15) The Constitutional Court, despite possessing the requisite power, decided to exercise judicial restraint and not do the Duma’s job, which shows that European pressure currently does not outweigh public opinion.

The most important implication of the Constitutional Court’s decision is that it continues to recognize Russia’s international obligations without treading on the legislature’s turf. Whether capital punishment is reinstated or not is not very material because the death penalty continues to exist de facto in Russia, where 4630 inmates died in 2008. (16) High rates of ill-treatment, torture, and denial of necessary medical treatment are among the customary causes. For example, fatal cases of tuberculosis are five times more prevalent within the penitentiaries than on the outside. So long as the criminal conviction rate continues to hover around 99 percent (17), simply standing trial constitutes a death sentence for many inmates.

Source Notes:
(5) “The Constitutional Court of Russia,” ITAR-TASS, Ibid.


(12) “On November 19, 2009, the Constitutional Court,” The Constitutional Court website, Ibid.


(14) “Officials addressed the Constitutional Court,” BBC Russian, Ibid.


START update

For the last few months, Russian and US officials have been engaged in discussions geared towards agreeing on a new strategic arms deal before START II expires on December 5. Neither the US nor Russia benefits if the talks fail because the treaty’s expiry would leave the world’s two largest nuclear arsenals unmonitored.

The administration of President Barack Obama already has made at least one significant concession under the rubric of arms control, abandoning the European ABM component, which Moscow viewed as a threat to its own deterrent capabilities. Although Moscow welcomed this move, reports from talks in November between Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and National Security Advisor James Jones indicated that serious disagreements remained over linkage between offensive and defensive weapons, as well as on the subject of non-nuclear strategic arms. (1)

In the month that has passed since Jones’ Moscow visit, it has emerged that the National Security Advisor tabled a compromise proposal on the question of how to categorize strategic weapons that has been accepted in principle by Russian negotiators. The United States will define “the majority” of its non-nuclear delivery platforms as strategic assets, in return for which the four US missile submarines converted from ICBM to cruise missile platforms will not be counted in the “strategic category” by Moscow. (2)

The fact that this question has been resolved is a step in the right direction, but other disputes (including the offensive-defensive one) remain.
Moscow argues that warheads merely dismantled for storage, instead of being destroyed, should be counted as “actual” because they can so easily be re-deployed (3), while the United States is seeking to maintain its verification capabilities vis-à-vis Russia’s mobile ICBMs, particularly the Topol and Topol M. According to General Nikolai Makarov, Chief of the General Staff of Russia’s Armed Forces, permitting mobile US verification teams to remain in situ would be unpalatable because “we have no such missions in the US.” The US mission should therefore “be abolished.” (4) An unnamed official close to the talks supported Makarov’s view, arguing that inspections of Russia’s mobile ICBM force would constitute an unacceptable “unilateral” (5) concession.

Moscow apparently has faith that an agreement can be reached, signed, and implemented before December 5, in spite of these issues. (6) This confidence likely is due in part to the fact that Russia does not expect any difficulties over the question of ratification by the Duma or by the United States Congress. This is evidenced by Lavrov’s insistence that both countries would be bound by the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, which states that signatories must “refrain from measures that run counter to the subject and objective of the document signed by them” in any transitory period. (7) The Obama administration, on the other hand, cannot afford to be so cavalier about the ratification process, for which reason Michael McFaul (Presidential advisor for Russia and Eurasia) has explained, the White House is focused, in the short term at least, on reaching a bridging agreement. (8) Whether this can be achieved in the remaining days of the Treaty’s life span (at the time of writing, less than a week), remains to be seen.

**GRU Chief on Georgia, ABM**

On 13 November, Russia’s military intelligence service (GRU) celebrated its 91st anniversary. The agency’s new director, Lieutenant-General Aleksandr
Shlyakhturov—who took office in April 2009 (9) – used the occasion to speak out about a number of issues, including planned reforms and Georgia.

According to Shlyakhturov, there is imminent danger of a renewed conflict in the Caucasus: President Mikhail Saakashvili is unpredictable and may yet “yield to the temptation to use force” in an attempt to “return these countries…which have become independent” (South Ossetia & Abkhazia) to Tbilisi’s “jurisdiction.”(10) Shlyakhturov asserted that Georgia is engaging in an intense military modernization and re-armament program with a view to such action, with UAV’s, tanks and anti-aircraft assets (such as Patriot and Stinger missiles) arriving from Israel, Ukraine and the United States respectively; (11) the Turkish government is providing assistance in the creation of new “crack” special-forces units tasked specifically with operations in mountainous terrain. (12)

Given the events of August 2008 and the increased anti-Georgian rhetoric emanating from Moscow throughout this year, it is hardly surprising that Tbilisi is taking what it sees as the necessary steps to defend itself. The question is, are Shlyakhturov’s comments designed merely as a shot across Saakashvili’s bow, or are they part of a gradual ratcheting up process, designed to provide Moscow with a “legitimate” Casus Belli in the very near future?

The second subject addressed (albeit more briefly) by the GRU chief concerned the recent changes in the US’s National Missile Defense stance. Shlyakhturov affirmed the Russian view that any defense system “introduces a certain destabilization” in the strategic arena, (13) but acknowledged that Moscow had to accept the US desire for some form of defense. Russia apparently can live with the “lesser of the two evils” in the form of a NATO “theater” defense system. (14)

Shlyakhturov’s remarks contained no mention of the reforms that have been mooted for GRU for some time, leaving defense pundits to hypothesize on
whether the planned reductions and restructuring of the agency’s personnel (specifically of its elite units) has begun, or whether they will occur at all.

Source Notes:
(1) See The ISCIP Analyst, Volume XVI Number 5, Part 1 (12 Nov 09)
(4) “RF, US Have Disagreements On START Talks-Gen Staff Chief,” ITAR-TASS, 12 Nov 09; OSC Transcribed Text via World News Connection.
(11) Ibid.
(12) “Georgia Asks Turkey For Help To Create Special Operations Force,” ITAR-TASS, 13 Nov 09; OSC Transcribed Text via World News Connection.
Russian Federation: Energy Politics
By Creelea Henderson

Hiccup: Bushehr startup stalls as Moscow joins IAEA censure
On November 16, Russian Energy Minister Sergei Shmatko announced that Iran’s first nuclear power station, a Russian-built facility at Bushehr, would not launch by the end of the year, as previously scheduled. Construction of the nuclear power plant was officially completed last March, and Russian and Iranian engineers conducted a pre-commissioning test run of its equipment in October. But, in spite of the advanced stage of operations, Shmatko said that start up at Bushehr would be pushed back until the engineers had issued their findings, and stressed that the delay “is defined absolutely 100% by technological conditions.” (1) In Tehran, lawmakers were quick to perceive political motives behind Moscow’s “technical reasons.” The Iranian Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Energy, Hamidreza Katouzian, warned that “the Russians should know if they politicize the completion of the Bushehr nuclear power plant project, then ... ties between Iran and Russia would face many changes.” (2)

Tehran’s protests arose days after a meeting took place between Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and US President Barack Obama on the sidelines of an Asia-Pacific summit in Singapore, and ahead of the November 27 vote by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to censure Iran for failing to disclose a secret nuclear enrichment site. (3) In a rare signal of cooperation, Russia joined with 24 other nations on that occasion to approve a resolution calling on Iran to clarify the purpose of the Fordow plant found buried in a mountainside, halt construction of the facility, and allow IAEA inspectors to confirm that there are no more such hidden sites. (4) The Russian Foreign Ministry urged Iran to “react with full seriousness to the signal contained in the resolution ... and to

(14) Ibid.
ensure full cooperation with the agency." (5) The broad international show of support for a tough stance against Iran over its nuclear program has raised expectations that the UN soon will approve stringent new sanctions, including measures that would block foreign investment in Iran’s oil and gas industries. (6)

Russian participation in the IAEA resolution may signal Moscow’s displeasure at Tehran’s decision to back out of a Russian-brokered deal, which would have required Iranian nuclear facilities to send low-enriched uranium to Russia, where it would be processed and returned as fuel for Iranian research reactors. (7) It also may reflect alarm, after the revelation of Iran’s clandestine enrichment site showed Moscow’s repeated claims about the peaceful purpose of Iran’s nuclear program to be hollow. Whatever the particular cause of Moscow’s discomfort, recent developments point to its growing sense of caution toward Iran, including the stalled commission of the Bushehr nuclear power station and an overdue shipment of S-300 surface-to-air missiles Russia promised to sell Iran in 2007. (8) Tehran has threatened to bring legal action against Russia if its contracts are not honored promptly.

This is not the first time that development of the Bushehr facility has stalled. The plant was already five years behind schedule, when construction ground to a halt in 2007 amid Russian claims that Iran had failed to make payments on time. Tehran fiercely denied that allegation, calling the delay a political feint timed to coincide with UN sanctions. (9) Moscow’s reputation for withholding energy supplies for political purposes blooms perennially.

This time, however, Moscow appears to be hedging. On the same day that Russia voted to censure Iran, Shmatko retracted his prior announcement, claiming the media had misinterpreted it, and he pledged a timely launch for Bushehr. (10) Shmatko spoke of the political and economic significance of the project for Moscow, noting that, as the first nuclear power plant in the area, “it will give an impetus to nuclear power engineering throughout the Persian Gulf area.”
Sounding chastened, he added, “and we realize the responsibility that we bear.”

(11) Two days later, he paid a state visit to Tehran, where he met the head of Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization, Ali Akbar Salehi, with whom he toured the Bushehr facility, which he called “a symbol of cooperation between Iran and Russia and nobody dares to hurt it.” (12) In the course of the visit he also held talks with Iranian Oil Minister Masoud Mir-Kazemi about Russian companies’ involvement in Iran’s oil, gas, and petrochemicals industries.

With new sanctions pending in the UN, Russia appears to be using its state-to-state leverage with Tehran to secure lucrative eleventh-hour deals and to further its national interests in the nuclear technology market, in Iranian upstream oil and gas sectors and in other energy ventures.

Source Notes:
(1) “Russia delays Iran’s Bushehr nuclear power station,” Reuters, 16 Nov 09 via (http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSTRE5AF1MF20091116).
(3) “IAEA votes to censure Iran over nuclear cover-up,” Reuters, 27 Nov 09 via (http://www.reuters.com/article/GCA-Iran/idUSTRE5AQ1BZ20091127?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=11621&sp=true).
(4) Ibid.
(5) Ibid.
(8) Ibid.
(9) “Iran Opens 2 Plants at Bushehr Nuclear Reactor,” Fox News, 3 Apr 07 via (http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,263600,00.html).


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