

Conference Paper
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Between Scylla and Charybdis: Is there a Middle Path for Middle Powers in the
Indo-Pacific Region?
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Paper Title: Sleepwalking into the New Great Game: US, Chinese, and Russian Competition in Central Asia

Synopsis: After the end of the Cold War, the significance of Central Asia and the level of competition among great powers in the region dipped for two decades. The return of hard-edged competition between the U.S. and Russia, and the Chinese Belt and Road initiative, have brought three great powers into an asymmetric competition for influence in the region. Russia remains the dominant security patron for most Central Asian states while Chinese forays under the BRI have established it as the leading investment patron. While U.S. interests have focused on sustaining the campaign in Afghanistan, this may change if a political settlement to the war emerges. As the Central Asian states consider the prospect of Sino-Russian competition or condominium, the U.S. represents a potentially attractive albeit secondary patron. The U.S. offers prestige and security cooperation without the prospect of overbearing and constant intervention in the domestic and foreign policies of the states. The obstacles to expanded U.S. influence remain physical access and proximity, scale of investment, and the friction associated with U.S. concerns over human rights. As the region moves into this three-cornered fight for influence, the Central Asian States will face a series of choices on how secure external assistance from one or more of these great powers without surrendering sovereignty or independence in political, military, and economic terms. At the same time, the three great powers will face strategic choices on cooperation and competition for influence given their very different interests and endowments.

Keywords: Great Power Competition, Central Asia, Russia, China, U.S., Great Game, Sino-Russian Rivalry