



*We Shall Be Masters: Russian Pivots to East Asia from Peter the Great to Putin*, by Chris Miller. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. 384 pp. ISBN: 978-0674916449

Chris Miller, a professor at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, presents a comprehensive and well-informed chronicle of the history of Russia’s engagement with Asia over the past three centuries. The main argument is that Russia’s Asian dreams are restrained by the country’s firm rooting in Europe. The book has nine well-documented chapters that provide an illustrative account of Russia’s quest for great-power status in Asia over 300 years of history.

Offering the background note with Peter the Great’s vision of Pacific Ocean as a space of territorial enlargement, commercial expansion, or geopolitical competition, the introductory pages give an interesting account of Russia’s fluctuating foreign policy in Asia (p.10). The cycle of Russia’s interests and disinterests in Asia is erratic and episodic with no pattern (p.12). To support his argument Miller quotes Russian historian Andrei Lobanov-Rostovsky reference to Russian history that it is a “perpetual swinging of the pendulum between two poles of attraction, Europe and Asia” (p.13).

The first chapter gives an account of Tsar Alexander’s vision of a Transpacific empire which included the quest for Alaskan colonies of Russia (p. 26). Miller presents a historical account of the competition between Russia and European powers for territorial expansion in the Pacific (p.51).

The second chapter focuses on Russian expansion and consolidation in the Far East (p. 62). The chapter focuses on the persistent dilemma among the Russian leaders over the significance of the region where one group considered the Far eastern provinces as “necessary evil” and the other group viewed them as “springboard for expanding Russia’s power in the Pacific (p.65). Miller’s analysis suggests that failure on the part of the Russian elite to focus on the transportation infrastructure in Far East left the region neglected (p.83).

The third chapter essentially provides an insight into the Russian expansion in the Central Asian borderland. Miller explains the dynamics of the region through the eyes of explorer Nikolay Przhevalsky who embodied the romance of imperial expansion of Russia (p.92). Here, Miller argues that the Russian policy shifted its focus from Central Asia to Europe quoting Katkov that “the Russian history is played out in the Europe and not in Asia” (p.105).

The fourth chapter further elaborates the vision of Prince Nicholas that Russia had the right and the responsibility to rule in Asia (p.123). Miller comprehensively describes the idea of a Trans-Siberian Railway emerged which captivated the minds of Tsar Alexander III and Sergei Witte (p.116). Here, Miller explores the factors affecting the Russia–China and Russia–Japan relations.

In the next two chapters, Miller continues with the overarching theme and elaborates Stalin’s policy of using Bolshevism to garner support and build an alliance against the capitalist nations. In the background of Stalin’s “two camp theory,” the chapter discusses reasons for the rift between the Chinese communists and the Soviet (p.171). Miller argues that among other things, the great depression and Sino-Soviet war of 1929, constrained Soviet ambitions in Asia (p.176). While talking about Stalin’s vision of expanding Soviet interests in Asia, the author discusses Stalin’s ideologies behind his foreign policy objectives (p. 184). In line with his argument, Miller points out that less attention was given to the Far East by Stalin as he considered the benefits from the Far East questionable compared to the costs involved.

Seventh chapter discusses Nikita Khrushchev’s policy of “Peaceful Coexistence” and the widening rift between Russia and China for leadership over the international communist movement. (p.219). The author’s analysis suggests that this policy backfired as it brought Soviet Union and USA to the brink of war many times and accomplished very little for Soviet strategic interests (p.245).

In the eighth chapter, Miller provides a critical insight into Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of Perestroika. Miller scrutinizes Gorbachev’s policies and concludes that Gorbachev’s optimism about Asia was misplaced since the broader agenda of disarmament, economic exchange and mutual security with the East Asian countries did not materialize (p.271).

In the concluding ninth chapter, Miller briefly mentions foreign policy of Vladimir Putin in the Asia-Pacific. Miller points out the limits to Putin's pivot to Asia which are economic and geopolitical in nature (p.282). Miller compares all the leaders of Russia who have looked for engagement with the East but later shifted focus to the Europe (p.285).

However, the book curiously does not mention the recent developments in the Russian Far East and deepening of Russia's partnership with China and its Central Asian neighbors. The multivector foreign policy of Putin is not discussed and seems to challenge Miller's argument. Another missing point is reference to Chinese sources on the subject that could have added to the significance of the book.

Overall, Chris Miller's book has strengths that make the book a significant contribution to the existing literature on Russian foreign policy. The book stands out as the author has skillfully arranged a plethora of existing literature on the history of Russian foreign policy. The book is brilliantly written with interesting personal anecdotes and facts that help in understanding the concurrent politics of Russia. The book has contemporary relevance to understand the Russia-Ukraine crisis and the West as it discusses the historical background of Russia's inherent sense of insecurity about its western border. This book will be of interest to students of international history, academicians, policy makers and anyone who is keen to study Russian foreign policy.

**Dr. Shweta**

Dr. Shweta earned her PhD in politics with a specialization in international relations from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Presently, she lives in Japan and independently pursues research focusing on strategic and security affairs in Indo-Pacific region.