
In his book *We Shall Be Masters: Russia Pivot to East Asia from Peter the Great to Putin*, Chris Miller discusses why, considering the fluctuating geopolitical interest in East Asia, Russia persistently, although not consistently, attempts to engage in the region. In contrast to existing theories of Russia's enduring interest dictated by, *inter alia*, geography, trade or identity, the historical approach chosen by Miller reveals that Russian foreign policy in Asia ‘has been built on a foundation of fantasies, on dreams and delusions’ (15). Russia's approach to East Asia is presented as securing the balance with its geopolitical strategy in the West, which is reflected in the title chosen by Miller — an extract from a quote of the well-known Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky: ‘In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, while in Asia we shall be masters’ (11-12, 98).

The book is composed of the Introduction, Conclusion and eight chapters that follow the historical timeline of Russia's striving for influence in Asia. Chapter 1 describes Russia's failure to establish its sphere of influence in the North Pacific and, specifically, to maintain settlements in Alaska and Fort Ross. By 1824, however, Russia recognised the preponderance of America in North Pacific trade and subsequently sold both colonies. This was the result not only of mistakes and hardships but also Russia's shifting interest towards the territories of the Far East. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss this shift, commencing with Amur's agenda, complicated by balancing superiority in the region and stability in relations with China. It continued with Russia's desired expansion into China's western borderlands: this led Russia to the brink of war, narrowly averted by Russia's withdrawal from Yili. Throughout that period, Russia experienced both turbulent times in internal affairs and several wars with the Ottoman Empire, which made the costs of the ‘romance of expansion’ (106) in Asia too high to sustain. Chapter 4 reveals another drawback in Russian geopolitical ambitions in Far Eastern territories — distance — which the Russian tsar ordered to remedy with a decree: ‘Let a railroad be built’ (117). The progress, however, was hindered by multiple factors, including the growing power of Japan in the East. Thus, by the time the revolution broke out in Russia and the tsarist dynasty came to an end, no major progress had been achieved in building relations with Asia.

Chapters 5 to 8 assess Russia's policies throughout the 20th century. In contrast to tsarist territorial ambitions, the new period was based on the expansion...
of influences through ideology. With the failure of the revolution in Europe, China became the next natural candidate to absorb socialistic rule. The swings of the Chinese revolution determined the nature of Soviet-China relations during the period: from friendship to war, and back again. Relations with Japan were no easier, especially after Japan's seizure of Manchuria, which led the Soviet Union to adopt largely defensive policies in the East. World War II changed the balance of power, redrawing the map of the world. Simultaneously, Russia's socialist ideology was gaining ground in Asia, particularly in China and North Korea, though strained by Stalin's unwillingness to engage in the region. However, Stalin's successors attempted to counterbalance the differences between Russia and Asia by employing so-called 'soft-power socialism'. Eventually, the policy of non-intervention in Taiwan by the Soviet Union and China's invasion in the Himalayan territories disputed with India resulted in mutual distrust and the cancellation of the nuclear co-operation programme by the 1960s. Nor did Soviet dreams of a Russia–China–India alliance and a system of collective security in Asia ever materialise. It is during perestroika period that Soviet power realised the scientific and technological progress of Asia. Withdrawal from Afghanistan and compromise in Korea were supposed to bring new opportunities and improvement in relations with Asian powers. As Miller concludes: ‘[u]nlike the Asian expansionism of Nicholas’s day, however, Gorbachev’s perestroika pivot ended not with a bloody war, but simply by petering out’ (272).

The Conclusion discusses Putin's 21st-century Russia and its growing geopolitical interest in Asia. It focuses on post-2014 developments after two decades of lasting stagnation in the geopolitical interest of post-Soviet Russia. Curiously, Miller chose to address Russia's recent history in a very concise concluding chapter, not exceeding 20 pages. Rather than engaging in in-depth discussion, Miller leaves open the question: 'Will Russia’s current pivot [to Asia] last?' (282).

This question came at a timely moment in the new swing of geopolitical developments. Russia's aggression in Ukraine met with a strong response from the West, leaving Russia with a limited option of seeking economic co-operation in Asia and the Middle East. Although not discussed in the book, Miller’s analysis of the history of Russia’s Eastern ambitions creates ground for reflection. Rather than seeking an explanation for the “perpetual swing of the pendulum”, that historian Lobanov-Rostovsky perceived; Miller attributes Russia’s growing and declining interest, successes and failures to a ‘spasm of enthusiasm’ (291). Geopolitical studies of Russia’s involvement in
Asia are not new, and Miller successfully builds on them as well as multiple historical accounts, evidenced by an extensive bibliography, to advance his argument.

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