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Actors in Russia’s East Asia Policymaking

This chapter serves two purposes. Firstly, it assesses the ‘weight’ or significance of different elite actors’ statements on East Asia examined in the following chapters according to their likely influence on Russia’s East Asia policymaking and discourse. Secondly, it outlines the nature of policymaking under Yeltsin and Putin, highlighting the differences and continuities between the two periods. This provides the background against which we assess the greater convergence of elite perceptions under Putin. The chapter firstly characterises the Russian foreign policy elite according to their likely influence on policy. The chapter examines each actor in more detail with regards to their role in East Asia policy.

2.1 Defining and characterising actors

Perceptions can be held by an individual policymaker or shared by a particular group. The term ‘actor’ is used herein when referring to the major groups and individuals involved in the East Asia discourse and/or policymaking, including those who participated continuously in the policymaking process and those who influenced discourse and/or policy occasionally when dealing with specific issues. These actors are collectively referred to as the ‘foreign policy elite’, whose perceptions are considered distinct from the general public’s in two ways – their greater potential impact on foreign policy making and their higher level of informed opinion due to their expertise and greater access to information. However, unlike Soviet times when the foreign policy elite was structurally centralised, the scope of who constitutes post-Soviet Russia’s foreign policy elite has broadened. Democratisation led to a ‘proliferation’ of actors due to the greater freedom of expression and media outlets. This increases the difficulty in ‘weighing’ the significance of actors, especially non-official ones. Moreover, proximity and influence depends to a large extent on personal contacts, making it harder to assess an actor’s influence. Furthermore, the exact extent of Russian official actors’ influence in determining foreign policy is difficult to discern, since their influence does
not necessarily correspond to that outlined in the constitution. Moreover, the access and significance of actors varies according to the issue in question, for example military or economic. Also, sometimes actors act autonomously according to their own interests – an acute problem under Yeltsin. In light of this, the question of who determines East Asia policy is problematic. Although the president has the final say in policy, this was questionable during Yeltsin’s later years. Moreover, who influences the president’s decisions on East Asia policy and how remains unclear.

As this research concentrates on tracing and outlining the nature of elite discourse, it nonetheless seems worth analysing the following units broadly distinguished by their level of proximity to East Asia policy. This elite characterisation helps to identify the significance of the evidence examined. Primary emphasis would be given to statements made by central actors who determine policy and represent the official position. This group includes the president, the Presidential Administration (PA), the Security Council (SB), the Foreign Ministry (MID), the intelligence services, both internal (FSB) and external (SVR, GRU), the Defence Ministry (MO), and the Russian Armed Forces. The second group consists of sectoral actors, who become significant in particular issues that directly concern them, like arms transfers and energy issues. This group firstly consists of those at the official level, such as the economics and energy ministries, and secondly, economic interest groups like the Military-Industrial Complex (VPK) and the Fuel and Energy Complex (TEK). The third group is the non-governmental political elite who are prominent either in terms of institutional responsibility and expertise like both legislative chambers’ international affairs committees, or active and vocal in the foreign policy and East Asia discourse. The fourth group consists of specialists based at relevant academic institutes like the Institute for Far Eastern Studies (IDVRAN), Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), Institute for World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), Oriental Institute (IVRAN), and independent institutions like the Carnegie Moscow Centre (CMC). It also includes the Council for Foreign and Defence Policy (SVOP), which gathers various specialists to make policy recommendations, and journalists specialising in East Asian affairs. The significance of this latter group lay in its informed ‘critical’ or ‘auxiliary’ capacity in relation to the government’s perceptions and policy towards East Asia. However, its actual influence was marginal and dependant on personal contacts and access to the Kremlin rather than institutional clout. The last group is the Russian Far East elite which lies outside this circle of influence and were vocal on issues directly pertaining to their interests, for instance border demarcation (see Map 2.1). However, their influence on such issues became increasingly marginal under Putin. It should be noted that individual actors can transcend these layers of the elite, and perceptions and policy positions can be shared by different actors, cutting across institutional boundaries and elite groups. The nature and evolution of these groups’ influence from Yeltsin to Putin is now briefly examined.