



## Russian Strategic Logic

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Western observers are often astonished by Russian military decision-making, which defies the principle of waiting for full knowledge of the enemy before acting. The Russian approach holds that it is in engagement of the enemy that knowledge will emerge that can advance an ultimate strategic design.

The decision-making of Russian leadership and the logic informing it, particularly in the use of military force in operations outside the borders of Russia, has baffled Western onlookers over the past decade. In three events of global strategic import, Russian actions took the West by surprise: the large-scale maneuver in Georgia in the summer of 2008; the operation in Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea; and the intervention in Syria.

What is the strategic rationale behind these moves? What, for example, is the aim of the Russian intervention in Syria? Has Russia defined an end-state in light of which it calculates its steps in the campaign?

The events in Syria illuminate a difference in approach between linear Western thinking and Russian thought. In 2014, an American general operating in northern Syria told *The New York Times*, "Until I understand the logic of ISIS, I cannot operate against it effectively." Russian conduct in Syria demonstrates the reverse logic: we cannot wait to get to really know the forces in the region before we physically clash with them.

This way of thinking is a cultural element deeply rooted in the Russian heritage. In Tolstoy's classic novel, *War and Peace*, he presents the reader with an observation on the emerging nature of the phenomenon of war:

"The commander-in-chief is always in the midst of a series of shifting events and so can never at any moment consider the whole import of an event that is occurring. Moment by moment the event is imperceptibly shaping itself, and at every moment of this continuous, uninterrupted shaping of events, the commander-in-chief is in the midst of a most complex play..."

In contrast to the teachings at Western military institutions, Russian strategic thinking presupposes that from the moment one enters into action against a system, that system begins to evolve. Friction with reality is itself the key to planning. The potential for shaping an end-state according to a desired solution is not only revealed through friction, but arises from the very act.

This circularity explains the need for action, even before conditions have been created in which a final objective can be clearly defined. For those educated in planning according to the standards of American business schools, which stipulate that no step should be taken without first laying down a complete and detailed business plan, the Russian approach seems fundamentally irresponsible. This is why Westerners observing Russian courses of action are often as astonished as they are critical.

Operational Russian thinking does not completely ignore the need to define a purpose for action before implementation. But it ventures to recognize the paralysis that lies in holding back for lack of information in the initial stages. Instead of delaying action until sufficient knowledge has been attained to devise a positive strategic solution, the Russians step into action by using a basic logic that is fundamentally negative in the sense of denying the enemy's intention.

At the first stage, this logic asks nothing more than to thwart the enemy's course of action. This is probably the logic that informed Russia's decisions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. Its actions in those countries embodied an active initiative against the trend of the world order, which has been led, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, by American superpower hegemony.

The Russian line of thinking runs as follows. Out of action taken through negative logic – an effort to deny an existing course – greater knowledge will be achieved with which a further campaign can be planned, this time with a positive purpose.

This strategic logic explains how, despite the economic crisis in Russia, the problem of sanctions, and the difficulties inherent in implementing a military buildup, the Russian leadership has succeeded – in less than ten years of active initiative – to regain its status as a central superpower in the global system.

*Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for forty-two years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.*

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