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Weaponizing Occupation: Russia's Strategic Use of Territorial Control in Ukraine

1. Introduction

The situation Ukraine faces after three years of full-scale war with Russia presents a complex and deeply challenging reality. Moscow has orchestrated an increasingly brutal assault on civilian populations, launching almost daily barrages of drones, missiles, and bombs against cities throughout the country, systematically targeting infrastructure and power stations, which has created a humanitarian crisis of staggering proportions. Millions have been forcibly displaced, and countless others who sought refuge abroad remain unable to return. Despite these immense human and material costs and having preserved control over 80 percent of its territory against seemingly insurmountable odds, conventional wisdom might suggest that Ukraine would eagerly embrace any opportunity to end the bloodshed[1]. However, this rational calculus often fails to capture the Ukrainian perspective. Amid growing concerns about potential reductions in military aid and following U.S. President Donald Trump's proclamation of his intention to swiftly end the war, Ukraine's government and populace have been forced to seriously contemplate the prospect of a cease-fire[2]. This scenario stands in stark contrast to the comprehensive victory strategy outlined by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in the fall of 2024, and many Ukrainians harbor deep skepticism toward any negotiated settlement, adhering to the principle that no deal is preferable

[1] "War in Ukraine," *Global Conflict Tracker*, Council on Foreign Relations, last updated February 10, 2025. https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine (accessed October 20, 2025).

[2] Peter Baker, "Ukraine's Fears Deepen as U.S. and Russia Discuss 'End of War by Easter,'" *The New York Times*, February 16, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/16/us/politics/ukraine-zelensky-trump-russia.html (accessed October 20, 2025).

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to a bad deal. Kyiv's determination to continue fighting, even in grueling battles over ruined towns and villages, may appear to defy logical explanation to Western observers.

The remarkable resilience of Ukrainian society partially explains this continued support for the war effort. Despite relentless pressure on civilian areas, Ukraine has demonstrated an extraordinary ability to preserve and even rebuild elements of normal daily life. Western budgetary support, now accounting for 20 percent of Ukraine's GDP, has enabled the economy to achieve average growth of 4.4 percent over the past two years, accompanied by real household income growth and relatively contained inflation[3]. The reopening of maritime trade routes, following the effective neutralization of Russia's Black Sea Fleet by Ukrainian drones since mid-2023, has led to a 15 percent increase in Ukrainian exports over the past year[4]. Notably, approximately 40 percent of the weapons Ukraine deploys on the frontlines are now produced domestically, a significant increase from virtually none in 2022. While these developments do not erase the extraordinary hardships of war, they have fostered a resilience and adaptability within Ukrainian society that outside observers may struggle to fully appreciate.

More fundamentally, the complex implications of Russian occupation profoundly shape Ukrainian perspectives on the war. For Ukrainians, the occupation did not commence with the full-scale invasion in 2022 but represents a continuous reality spanning more than a decade, dating back to Moscow's seizure of Crimea and parts of the Donbas region[5], in 2014[6]. The brutality of Russian military rule has left an indelible mark not only in the south and east, where current fighting is concentrated, but also in the vicinity of Kyiv during the opening weeks of the 2022 invasion, when widespread atrocities were perpetrated in the capital's suburbs. Equally significant is the Ukrainian understanding that the threat extends far beyond the occupied territories themselves, affecting millions of internally displaced persons and countless others with family members living under Russian domination[7].

As many Ukrainians recognize, what Western observers have often characterized as brutal excesses – human rights violations, political repression, and war crimes –

[3] Alexandra Prokopenko, "Russia's Economic Gamble: The Hidden Costs of War-Driven Growth," *Carnegie Politika*, December 20, 2024. https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/12/russia-economy-difficulties?lang=en (accessed October 20, 2025).

[4] Christina Harward, Nicole Wolkov, Grace Mappes, Olivia Gibson, Frederick W. Kagan, and Nate Trotter, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 10, 2025," Institute for the Study of War, February 10, 2025. https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-10-2025 (accessed October 20, 2025).

[5] Donbas region: Eastern Ukrainian industrial basin (encompassing Donetsk/Luhansk oblasts) partially occupied since 2014, central to Russo-Ukrainian geopolitical competition.

[6] Nataliya Gumenyuk, "Putin's Ukraine: The End of War and the Price of Russian Occupation," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2025, published February 12, 2025. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putins-ukraine (accessed October 20, 2025).

[7] International Rescue Committee, "Ukraine: Families Mark Two Years of Full-Scale War, a Decade of Conflict and Displacement," February 16, 2025. https://www.rescue.org/uk/article/ukraine-families-mark-two-years-full-scale-war-decade-conflict-and-displacement (accessed October 20, 2025).

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constitute a vital component of Russia's strategic approach to the war. This issue extends beyond the immediate fate of those under Russian rule to encompass Moscow's broader strategy of using its control over significant Ukrainian populations to undermine the stability of the entire country, even without territorial expansion. Ukrainians are painfully aware that the Kremlin utilized the eight-year period of so-called frozen conflict after 2014, while engaging in ostensible negotiations, to establish a launching pad for its larger invasion. In essence, Russian control over any portion of Ukraine serves to subvert and erode Ukrainian sovereignty throughout the entire nation.

Speculation about potential negotiations to freeze the conflict along current frontlines has intensified, particularly with calls for a cease-fire. However, regardless of whether an agreement is reached, the assumption that a cease-fire would neutralize Russia's primary threat to Ukrainians fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the conflict. Throughout the three years since the full-scale invasion, Ukrainians have maintained overwhelming support for their armed forces, stemming from a profound sense of patriotism and the stark recognition that survival under Moscow's rule offers little prospect. Most Ukrainians view the continuation of armed resistance as vastly preferable to the terror of Russian occupation. For the West, a failure to recognize how Russia weaponizes its control over Ukrainian territory to undermine and destabilize the entire country risks making a cease-fire even more devastating than the ongoing war.

2. Theoretical Framework: Great Power Politics and Territorial Occupation as strategic Weaponry

This study examines the evolution of military occupation practices through an analysis of territorial control mechanisms observed in Ukraine from 2014-2024, utilizing empirical evidence from occupied territories to analyze how traditional models of military occupation have transformed into instruments of strategic influence. Our analysis is grounded in three foundational theoretical perspectives: offensive realism, coercive diplomacy, and strategic culture[8].

[8] Offensive realism: Structural IR theory positing that states maximize power for survival, prioritizing regional hegemony. Coercive diplomacy: Use of calibrated threats to compel adversaries to change behavior, distinct from brute force. Strategic culture: Socially transmitted assumptions shaping a state's habitual approaches to coercion, derived from historical institutional practices. See: J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics,* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001; A. L. George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War*, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1991; A. I. Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

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Table. 1. Theoretical Mechanisms of Occupation as Strategic Weaponry

Theoretical Framework	Core Mechanism	Strategic Application in Ukraine	Evidence from Study
Offensive Realism	Maximizing relative power through regional hegemony	Territory as strategic leverage rather than economic asset	Crimean militarization; Infrastructure development for military purposes
Coercive Diplomacy	Strategic compellence through controlled escalation	Occupied territories as negotiation instruments	Minsk agreements as diplomatic deception; Population control as bargaining tool
Strategic Culture	Historical continuity in population management	Soviet-era administrative practices in modern context	Filtration processes; Passport mandates; Educational system transformation

Source: Theoretical synthesis by the author, drawing on Mearsheimer (2001), George (1991), and Johnston (1995).

Offensive Realism and Great Power Politics

The fundamental backdrop for understanding the Russia-Ukraine conflict lies in John J. Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism[9], which posits that great powers seek to maximize their relative power and influence in the international system. This theoretical lens helps explain Russia's strategic approach to territorial occupation not merely as land acquisition but as a mechanism for projecting power and undermining rival states' sovereignty. Putin's Russia exemplifies offensive realism's core premise that states pursue regional hegemony when they perceive an opportunity to do so with limited international consequences.

Coercive Diplomacy and Territorial Control

Building on Alexander L. George's framework of coercive diplomacy[10], this study examines how Russia weaponizes territorial occupation as a form of strategic coercion. The systematic implementation of administrative control, population management, and institutional transformation in occupied territories serves as what Thomas C. Schelling termed "compellence" – using controlled escalation to achieve strategic objectives[11]. Russia's approach to occupation demonstrates an evolution of coercive diplomacy, where controlled territories serve as instruments for broader strategic goals rather than mere territorial gains[12].

[9] J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics,* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.
[10] A. L. George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War*, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1991.
[11] T. C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966.
[12] A. L. George, *Forceful Persuasion…*

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Strategic Culture and Population Control

The third theoretical pillar draws from Alastair Iain Johnston's concept of strategic culture[13], examining how Russia's historical experience with territorial control and population management influences its current occupation strategies. This framework helps explain the systematic nature of Russia's occupation policies, from the "filtration" process to the mandatory adoption of Russian passports, as manifestations of deeply embedded strategic cultural practices dating back to Soviet times. Jack L. Snyder's analysis of strategic culture[14] also provides a framework for examining the continuity in administrative practices, with documentation systems showing consistent methodological approaches across different occupied regions.

Synthesis and Application

These theoretical frameworks converge to explain Russia's occupation strategy as a sophisticated form of strategic weaponry operating on multiple levels:

- At the systemic level (offensive realism), occupation serves as a tool for maximizing relative power in the international system.
- At the strategic level (coercive diplomacy), occupied territories function as instruments of compellence.
- At the operational level (strategic culture), specific control mechanisms reflect historically evolved practices of population management.

This theoretical synthesis helps explain why traditional conflict resolution approaches focused solely on territorial delimitation fail to address the fundamental nature of Russia's occupation strategy as a weapon against Ukrainian sovereignty.

Further theoretical foundations for analyzing occupation as a strategic tool can be found in David A. Lake's concept of "hybrid hierarchy"[15], which provides an analytical structure for examining how formal sovereignty recognition can coexist with de facto control mechanisms. Empirical evidence from Mariupol demonstrates this dynamic, where administrative structures maintain civilian governance frameworks while implementing systematic population management protocols. Robert Jervis's framework on perception in international relations[16] provides analytical tools for examining diplomatic engagement patterns, exemplified by the implementation of the Minsk agreements[17] as a case study in perception management during occupation processes.

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[13] A. I. Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

[14] J. L. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1977.

[15] D. A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.

[16] R. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976.

[17] Minsk Agreements: Series of diplomatic protocols (2014-2015) aimed at resolving the Donbas conflict through cease-fire, withdrawal of heavy weapons, and restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty. Largely unimplemented due to Russo-Ukrainian disputes over sequencing.

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The observed transformation in occupation methodology corresponds to Barry R. Posen's identified elements of military doctrine evolution: environmental assessment, organizational adaptation, and technological integration[18]. The data indicates a progression in control mechanisms from 2014 to 2024, with initial occupation protocols in Crimea (2014-2022) establishing systematic administrative measures including documentation requirements, property ownership conditions, and educational system modifications. The implementation of population management systems, documented across multiple territories, demonstrates the standardization of control mechanisms. Robert J. Art and Patrick M. Cronin's coercive diplomacy framework[19] provides context for analyzing both immediate and long-term strategic objectives of these systems. Habib Badawi's analysis of intelligence architecture[20] offers methodological context for examining the integration of information control systems, including telecommunications infrastructure modification and digital monitoring protocols.

3. The Systematic Nature of Russian Occupation

Through its territorial seizures in 2014, Russia gained control over approximately seven percent of Ukrainian territory, encompassing roughly three million people. Since 2022, Russia has nearly tripled the Ukrainian land under its control, including approximately 80 percent of the Donbas and nearly 75 percent of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions[21] as of early 2025[22]. While precise statistics remain elusive, estimates suggest that around six million people – more than one-tenth of Ukraine's total population – now live under Russian rule, including 1.5 million children[23]. These figures persist despite significant population displacement, as many residents who could escape have fled.

The occupied territories present a mosaic of local conditions. Areas of eastern Donbas occupied a decade ago have long operated under Moscow-controlled separatist militias,

[18] B. R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

[19] R. J. Art, P. M. Cronin, *The United States and Coercive Diplomacy*, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2003.

[20] Habib Badawi, "The Transformation of Military Intelligence Architecture: From Battlefield to Intelligence Network: Evidence-Based Analysis of OSINT's Causal Impact in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict," *Indian Strategic Studies Forum (ISSF)*, November 2024. https://issf.org.in/2024/11/the-transformation-of-military-intelligence-architecture/ (accessed October 20, 2025).

[21] Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions: Southern Ukrainian territories occupied post-2022, critical for land bridge to Crimea and water/energy resources.

[22] Council on Foreign Relations, "War in Ukraine."

[23] United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU), *41st Periodic Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine, 1 August–31 December 2024* (Kyiv: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, December 31, 2024). https://ukraine.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/2024-12-31%20OHCHR%2041st%20periodic%20report%20on%20Ukraine.pdf (accessed October 20, 2025).

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characterized by neglect and isolation[24]. Men from these regions were among the first to be mobilized by Russia when the 2022 invasion began, suffering disproportionately high casualty rates. Other areas near the Russian border or southern coast, such as the Kherson, Luhansk[25], and Zaporizhzhia regions, fell during the invasion's initial weeks with minimal resistance, allowing Moscow to swiftly establish military administration. While these regions experienced less bombing and widespread destruction, their populations have endured severe physical and psychological coercion. The Russian government has specifically targeted these areas for large-scale resettlement by Russians, particularly military personnel, their families, and construction workers, deployed to demonstrate Russian dominion. Meanwhile, communities near the frontlines have borne the full brunt of the war; when Russian forces fail to capture or maintain control, they often resort to destruction, forcing residents to flee and Ukrainian troops to withdraw, sometimes after months of brutal combat. Consequently, locations such as Avdiivka and Bakhmut now exist under Russian control as ghost towns largely reduced to rubble.

Table 2. Evolution of Russian Territorial Control in Ukraine

Period	Territory Controlled	Estimated Population Under Control	Key Strategic Developments
2014-2022	~7% of Ukrainian territory	~3 million	Crimean annexation; Donbas separatist regions established; Administrative control systems developed
2022-2025	~20% of Ukrainian territory	~6 million[26]	80% of Donbas; 75% of Zaporizhzhia; 75% of Kherson; Systematic occupation policies implemented

Source: Based on territorial data from Council on Foreign Relations (2025) and UN Human Rights Monit oring Mission in Ukraine (2024).

The Mechanics of Control and Coercion

For Ukrainians, the primary concern extends beyond the mere quantity of territory under Russian control. While Russia has achieved modest gains along the frontlines over the past year, the total area under its domination has remained relatively stable since late 2022. Instead, the gravest threat emerges from Russia's methodical approach to imposing control over local populations and leveraging that control to advance Moscow's broader war objectives.

From the outset, Russia has implemented a reign of terror in captured towns and villages. Residents in Russian-controlled areas faced severe restrictions on movement,

[24] Barbieri, Jaroslava, "Raising Citizen-Soldiers in Donbas: Russia's Role in Promoting Patriotic Education Programmes in the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples' Republics," *Ethnopolitics* 23, no. 5 (2023): 515–36. doi:10.1080/17449057.2023.2220097

[25] Luhansk and Donetsk: Administrative regions within Donbas under Russian proxy control since 2014, later illegally annexed (2022).

[26] Includes 1.5 million children under Russian control as of early 2025.

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with many attempting to flee being shot dead in their vehicles. In active combat zones, Russian forces frequently employed Ukrainian civilians as human shields. The establishment of Russian control brought new challenges for survival, as local populations became preoccupied with securing necessities like medicine, water, food, with few able to contemplate resistance. Occupiers systematically severed Ukrainian Internet and cellular networks, replacing them with Russian alternatives – a tactical move designed to isolate occupied territories from contact with and information from the rest of Ukraine. They also implemented a comprehensive "filtration" process to "register" Ukrainians, a practice first introduced during Russia's Chechen campaigns three decades ago. While officially presented as a document verification procedure, Russian forces wielded filtration as a tool to identify and detain potentially "disloyal" individuals – particularly military-aged men attempting to escape – often under extremely harsh conditions. Throughout much of the war, filtration has continued in occupied regions and along the Russian border, frequently detaining Ukrainians based on dubious allegations about their loyalties, political views, social media activity, or the absence of data on their mobile devices.

Table 3. Russian Administrative Control Mechanisms in Occupied Territories

Control Mechanism	Timeline	Geographic Implementation	Strategic Objective
Filtration Process	2014-ongoing	All occupied territories	Identify and eliminate potential resistance; Population registration
Mandatory Russian Citizenship	2014 (Crimea); 2022+ (Other regions)	Universal in occupied areas	Legal integration; Psychological warfare; Loyalty enforcement
Telecommunications Replacement	2022-ongoing	Recently occupied territories	Information isolation from Ukraine; Integration with Russian networks
Educational System Russification	2016-ongoing	All functioning educational institutions	Cultural assimilation; Ideological indoctrination of youth
Property Rights Restrictions	2014-ongoing	All occupied territories	Economic coercion; Forced population displacement

Source: Based on occupation practices documented across multiple occupied regions.

The Crimean Template and Its Evolution

Russia's current war strategy was significantly enabled by its 2014 annexation of Crimea and occupation of eastern Ukraine. Observations from reporting on life in post-annexation Crimea revealed Moscow's sophisticated use of policies, regulations, and laws to advance broader military and strategic objectives. Ukrainians who refused Russian citizenship faced denial of medical care and non-recognition of their property rights. Remaining on the peninsula required demonstrating specific income levels and holding authorized employment, typically demanding Russian citizenship. Residents

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encountered numerous penalties for minor infractions, which under Russian law could be elevated to criminal offenses, potentially resulting in the revocation of residency permits. The cumulative effect was to cast suspicion on anyone retaining Ukrainian citizenship, forcing many to abandon their homes.

Meanwhile, Crimea underwent a gradual but inexorable transformation into an extensive military installation. Russia directed massive investments toward "civilian" infrastructure with clearly ulterior motives. For example, a highway connecting Simferopol to the seashore was constructed without exits, rendering it useless for local beach access but ideal for military vehicle transport. The impressive 12-mile Kerch Strait bridge[27], a nearly $4 billion investment, was ostensibly designed for civilian travel but proved even more crucial for transporting tanks, military units, and war materiel into Crimea, explaining why Ukrainian attacks on the bridge since 2022 have played such a vital role in the war effort.

The militarization of Crimean society proceeded systematically. Educational institutions faced increasing control, with references to Ukrainian heritage systematically erased. The establishment of the All-Russian Military Patriotic Social Movement ("the Young Army")[28] in 2016 provided a mechanism for indoctrinating Crimean youth and preparing them for military service[29]. This movement was later employed to "reeducate" Ukrainian children forcibly transferred to Russia after 2022, actions that prompted the International Criminal Court to issue arrest warrants for Putin and a member of his government in 2023. Despite Geneva Convention[30] prohibitions against drafting occupied populations for military service, Russia mobilized Crimean residents, as it did those in Donbas territories, during the 2022 invasion. Crimean Tatars[31], an Indigenous Muslim minority known for their resistance to Russian rule, faced disproportionate conscription rates.

Voices of opposition were systematically silenced. Since 2014, more than 220 people in Crimea have faced political detention, including at least 130 Crimean Tatars charged with extremism. Among them is Nariman Dzhelyal, the deputy chairman of the Mejlis

[27] Kerch Strait Bridge: Infrastructure project (2016-2018) linking Russia to occupied Crimea, serving dual civilian-military logistics functions.

[28] All-Russian Military Patriotic Social Movement ("Young Army"): State-sponsored youth organization promoting militarization and loyalty to the Kremlin, instrumentalized in occupied territories for ideological indoctrination.

[29] Freedom House, *Ukraine: Democracy Under Threat, 2024 Report* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, October 2024). https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/FHUkraineReport2024.pdf (accessed October 20, 2025).

[30] Geneva Convention (Fourth, 1949): Core instrument of international humanitarian law prohibiting inter alia the conscription of occupied populations into an occupier's armed forces (Article 51).

[31] Crimean Tatars: Turkic Muslim indigenous group subjected to targeted repression (e.g., disappearances, conscription) under Russian occupation since 2014.

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of the Crimean Tatar People[32], a representative body outlawed by Moscow in 2016[33]. By February 2022, virtually no one in Crimea retained the capacity to oppose Russia's military preparations, as civil society had been effectively dismantled and independent voices imprisoned.

The Russian government demonstrated equal sophistication in manipulating international perception. Through participation in the Minsk agreements – ostensibly aimed at achieving peace in Donbas after 2014 – Russian officials successfully diverted attention from their activities in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Pavlo Klimkin, Ukraine's foreign minister from 2014 to 2019, recalls a revealing encounter where Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in the presence of French and German diplomats, openly declared that "Moscow would never allow having really open elections in the occupied territories, as Ukrainians would choose whom they want, and that's not what the Kremlin wants." Klimkin observes that Putin never genuinely sought a peace agreement; the diplomatic process served merely as a strategic deception.

The New Face of Occupation

Since the 2022 invasion, Russia has rapidly deployed occupation strategies refined in Crimea, but with significantly heightened severity. In regions like Zaporizhzhia, the Kremlin swiftly implemented its Crimean playbook, imposing regulations governing healthcare access, employment, taxation, property rights, and education, even imposing Moscow time despite the region's location in the Eastern European time zone. The requirement for occupied populations to accept Russian passports serves as a form of psychological warfare – residents are falsely warned that returning to Ukraine could result in criminal charges for working in Russian institutions, attending Russian schools, or obtaining Russian documentation. While Ukraine may prosecute citizens for serving in occupation administrations or Russian militias, it does not criminalize receiving basic services from occupation authorities. Nevertheless, the Kremlin has weaponized disinformation to amplify fears of punishment.

The transformation of Mariupol serves as a stark illustration of Russia's evolving occupation strategy. Once a vibrant port city of 540,000, it endured an extraordinarily brutal siege from February to May 2022, resulting in the destruction of 95 percent of the city and claiming over 10,000 civilian lives[34]. Ukrainian officials estimate that only about

[32] Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People: Historic representative body of Crimean Tatars banned by Russia in 2016 as "extremist," symbolizing suppression of indigenous self-determination.

[33] "Nariman Dzhelyal, the Crimean Tatar Activist Standing Up to the Russian Occupation," World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), October 11, 2022. https://www.omct.org/en/resources/news/nariman-dzhelyal-the-crimean-tatar-activist-standing-up-to-the-russian-occupation (accessed October 20, 2025).

[34] Human Rights Watch, "'Our City Was Gone': Russia's Devastation of Mariupol, Ukraine," February 8, 2024. https://www.hrw.org/feature/russia-ukraine-war-mariupol/report (accessed October 20, 2025).

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90,000 residents remained[35]. Yet Moscow has aggressively promoted the devastated city to Russian settlers, claiming a population resurgence to 240,000. A January 2024 Russian state television documentary about Mariupol's real estate market inadvertently revealed the stark reality of occupation, showing a journalist touring bombed-out buildings – euphemistically termed *razrushka* or "little wrecked apartments" – while real estate agents offered investment opportunities in abandoned properties[36]. The crew navigated through debris and displaced residents' belongings while highlighting "marvelous views" from partially destroyed balconies.

Table 4. Demographic and Infrastructure Transformation in Mariupol

Transformation Indicator	Pre-Occupation (February 2022)	Post-Occupation (2024)	Strategic Implication
Ukrainian Population	540,000 residents	90,000 remaining[37]	83% population displacement
Russian-Claimed Population	0	240,000 (claimed resettlement)	Complete demographic replacement
Infrastructure Status	Fully functional city	95% destruction[38]	Systematic urban destruction followed by Russian reconstruction
Demographic Composition	Ukrainian majority	Russian military personnel and families	Militarization of civilian spaces

Source: Based on Ukrainian official estimates and Human Rights Watch documentation.

Empirical Evidence from Occupied Territories

Field data supports Alexander Wendt's institutional behavior theory[39] through documented administrative changes. The Mariupol case study provides quantitative and qualitative data on infrastructure modification rates, population demographic shifts, administrative system implementation, and information access protocols.

Implications for Security Studies

A previous contemporary security analysis framework[40] suggests the need for revised analytical approaches to modern occupation strategies. The data indicates several areas for further research: security framework adaptation requirements, diplomatic engagement methodology, and international response protocols. The evidence suggests that

[35] Human Rights Watch, "Ukraine: New Findings on Russia's Devastation of Mariupol," February 8, 2024. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/08/ukraine-new-findings-russias-devastation-mariupol (accessed October 20, 2025).

[36] Human Rights Watch, "'Our City Was Gone.'"

[37] Estimated Ukrainian residents remaining after siege and occupation.

[38] Infrastructure destruction rate following the siege of Mariupol (February-May 2022).

[39] A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

[40] Habib Badawi, *Understanding the Roots of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict: Causes, Course, and Future Trajectories,* "Wschód Europy. Studia Humanistyczno-Społeczne" 2023, Vol. 9, no. 2, p. 11-27. https://doi.org/10.17951/we.2023.9.2.11-27 (accessed October 20, 2025).

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contemporary occupation practices have evolved beyond traditional territorial control models, necessitating updated analytical frameworks for security studies and further empirical study of occupation as a strategic tool within modern conflict dynamics.

4. Beyond Territory: Rethinking Occupation as a Strategic Weapon in Modern Great Power Politics

The Russia-Ukraine conflict presents a paradigm-shifting case study in how territorial occupation has evolved from a traditional instrument of territorial expansion into a sophisticated weapon of strategic coercion in contemporary great power politics. Through the theoretical lenses of offensive realism, coercive diplomacy, and strategic culture, we can better understand why conventional approaches to conflict resolution – focused primarily on territorial demarcation and cease-fire arrangements – may prove insufficient in addressing the fundamental challenges posed by Russia's occupation strategy.

The evidence presented in this study reveals that Moscow's approach to territorial control represents more than mere land acquisition; it constitutes a deliberate strategy of weaponizing occupied territories to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty and stability. This transformation of occupation into a strategic weapon operates through three distinct but interconnected mechanisms:

1. First, as predicted by offensive realism, Russia's occupation strategy serves as a tool for maximizing relative power in the international system. However, unlike traditional territorial conquests, the value of occupied territories lies not in their physical or economic assets but in their utility as instruments of strategic leverage. The systematic implementation of administrative control, population management, and institutional transformation in occupied territories demonstrates how modern occupation serves broader strategic objectives beyond territorial gain.
2. Second, through the lens of coercive diplomacy theory, we observe how Russia has refined its occupation practices from the Crimean template to create a more sophisticated form of strategic compellence. The evolution from the relatively measured approach in Crimea to the more aggressive tactics employed in recently occupied territories suggests an increasing recognition of occupation's utility as a coercive instrument, challenging traditional assumptions about the relationship between territorial control and strategic objectives.
3. Third, Russia's strategic culture has shaped a distinctive approach to occupation that combines Soviet-era population management techniques with modern information warfare capabilities. The result is a hybrid form of territorial control that serves both immediate tactical objectives and longer-term strategic goals. This cultural dimension helps explain the persistence and sophistication of Russia's occupation strategies, even in the face of significant international resistance and economic costs.

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Looking forward, these findings suggest several important implications for international security and conflict resolution:

- Future security arrangements must account for the ways in which occupied territories can be weaponized against sovereign states, even without further territorial expansion.
- International security guarantees and support mechanisms must evolve to address not just the physical aspects of territorial occupation but also its use as a tool of strategic coercion.
- Traditional peace-making frameworks that focus primarily on territorial settlements may prove inadequate when addressing conflicts where occupation serves as a strategic weapon rather than a territorial objective.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict thus represents not just a challenge to the international order but a fundamental shift in how territorial occupation functions in modern great power competition. This evolution demands new theoretical frameworks and practical approaches to international security that can effectively counter the weaponization of occupied territories while preserving state sovereignty in an increasingly complex global environment.

As we move forward, the international community must recognize that addressing Russia's occupation strategy requires more than traditional diplomatic solutions or military deterrence. It necessitates a comprehensive approach that accounts for the multiple dimensions through which occupation can be weaponized against sovereign states. Only by understanding and countering this evolved form of territorial control can the international community develop effective mechanisms to preserve peace and stability in regions vulnerable to great power competition. The lessons learned from Ukraine's experience will likely shape international approaches to territorial conflicts and occupation for generations to come. As great power competition intensifies in various regions around the globe, understanding how occupation can be weaponized – and developing effective countermeasures – becomes increasingly crucial for maintaining international peace and security.

The Future at Stake

Putin's vision extends beyond controlling Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk, or occupied villages in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia; he dismisses Western concern over such territories, viewing Russia's superior size and strength as sufficient justification for control. However, just as the 2014 annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine failed to satisfy Moscow's ambitions, formal recognition of Russia's current territorial gains would not prevent future aggression. Putin's approach mirrors Stalin's notorious characterization of Soviet citizens as "screws of the immense machine of the government" – replaceable components at the state's disposal[41]. For Putin, territorial

[41] Norman M. Naimark, "Putin In Stalin's Mirror," Hoover Institution, May 1, 2023. https://www.hoover.org/research/putin-stalins-mirror (accessed October 20, 2025).

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control, the erasure of Ukrainian statehood, and population indoctrination through propaganda and terror serve to create more "screws" for his perpetual war machine.

Yet, historical experience suggests that even the most oppressive systems contain seeds of resistance. Prior to 2022, Crimea's pervasive FSB[42] presence made virtually any form of opposition impossible, creating an illusion of complete submission to annexation. Today, however, activists regularly display yellow ribbons – symbols of Ukrainian resistance – in Yalta and Sevastopol. These acts of defiance demonstrate that opposition depends not only on the strength of Russia's security apparatus but also on widespread belief in the possibility of change. The nine-month Russian occupation of Kherson, followed by an eventual retreat, revealed the fundamental failure of occupation institutions to Russify the local population.

Recent polling by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology[43] indicates a slight increase in Ukrainians willing to consider territorial concessions to end the war – from 32 to 38 percent between early October and December 2023. Yet 51 percent remain opposed to any such concessions, despite the war's relentless toll. More importantly, this framing misses the crucial point that for most Ukrainians, the extent of Putin's territorial control matters less than Russia's weaponization of occupation itself. The essential question concerns the security guarantees required to neutralize this weapon and preserve Ukrainian sovereignty.

Ukraine might entertain a war-ending agreement under specific conditions: NATO membership, provision of sophisticated defensive weapons, European Union integration, and comprehensive Western reconstruction financing. However, until Washington and its European allies provide such guarantees – and until the West acknowledges that Russia's occupation strategy targets all of Ukraine – Ukrainians will likely maintain their commitment to resistance, regardless of cost. Should a cease-fire be implemented without addressing this fundamental Russian threat, lasting peace and stability will remain elusive.

The international community must recognize that allowing Russia to permanently occupy and rule over seized Ukrainian territory not only violates fundamental international norms but also poses a direct threat to global stability. A settlement that permits Moscow to consolidate its occupation as the price for temporary peace would ultimately lead to even greater violence in the future. The challenge ahead lies not in negotiating territorial compromises but in developing comprehensive security frameworks that can effectively counter Russia's weaponization of occupied territories and preserve Ukrainian sovereignty for generations to come.

[42] FSB (Federal Security Service): Principal Russian security agency overseeing counterinsurgency and political repression in occupied territories.

[43] Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS): Ukraine's leading sociological research entity, providing empirical data on public attitudes toward conflict resolution.

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5. Concluding Remarks

This study has examined Russia's transformation of territorial occupation from a conventional instrument of territorial expansion into a sophisticated weapon of strategic coercion in the context of the Ukraine conflict. Through the integration of offensive realism, coercive diplomacy theory, and strategic culture analysis, we have demonstrated how Moscow's occupation strategy operates through three interconnected mechanisms: maximizing relative power through strategic leverage, employing occupation as an instrument of coercive diplomacy, and implementing hybrid control systems that combine historical population management practices with contemporary information warfare capabilities.

The empirical evidence presented reveals that Russia's approach to territorial control in Ukraine represents a paradigm shift in how great powers may weaponize occupied territories in the twenty-first century. Unlike traditional territorial conquests focused on economic or strategic assets, Russia's occupation strategy derives its primary value from its utility as an instrument of sustained coercion against Ukrainian sovereignty. The systematic implementation of administrative control mechanisms, population management protocols, and institutional transformation processes demonstrates the evolution of occupation from a static territorial arrangement to a dynamic strategic weapon.

The findings contribute to international relations scholarship by expanding our understanding of how territorial occupation functions in contemporary great power competition. The theoretical framework developed here provides analytical tools for examining similar conflicts where territorial control serves broader strategic objectives beyond mere land acquisition. The study's documentation of Russia's occupation practices offers empirical evidence for understanding the mechanics of modern strategic coercion and its implications for international security. However, this research acknowledges several limitations that point toward future scholarly inquiry. The analysis would benefit from deeper engagement with Ukrainian academic perspectives and institutional knowledge, particularly regarding the historical context of territorial control in the region and local responses to occupation policies. Ukrainian scholars and research institutions possess invaluable insights into the cultural, social, and political dimensions of occupation that could enhance our understanding of resistance mechanisms and adaptation strategies. Future research should prioritize collaboration with Ukrainian academic institutions to develop more comprehensive analytical frameworks.

Additionally, the study's focus on the Russia-Ukraine case suggests the need for comparative analysis examining how other great powers may employ similar strategies of weaponizing territorial control. The theoretical mechanisms identified here require testing across different regional contexts and strategic cultures to establish their broader applicability in international relations theory.

The practical implications of this research extend beyond academic discourse to policy considerations for international security. The findings indicate that traditional ways of resolving conflicts, which mainly focus on drawing borders, might not work well

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in situations where occupation is used as a strategy instead of just a goal. International security frameworks must evolve to address the weaponization of occupied territories and develop effective countermeasures that can preserve state sovereignty while addressing the underlying strategic dynamics that drive such conflicts.

As great power competition intensifies globally, understanding how territorial occupation can be weaponized – and developing effective responses – becomes increasingly crucial for maintaining international peace and security. The lessons learned from Ukraine's experience will likely influence international approaches to territorial conflicts for years to come, making continued scholarly engagement with these dynamics essential for both academic understanding and practical policy development.

Abstract: This study examines the evolution of Russia's territorial occupation strategies in Ukraine, analyzing how occupation has transformed from a traditional instrument of territorial expansion into a sophisticated weapon of strategic coercion in modern great power politics. Employing a qualitative case study methodology that incorporates document analysis, historical process tracing, and theoretical framework synthesis, the research integrates offensive realism, coercive diplomacy theory, and strategic culture theory to analyze Russia's occupation strategies from 2014 to 2025. The analysis reveals that Russia has developed a sophisticated approach to weaponizing territorial occupation beyond mere land acquisition. This strategy operates through three mechanisms: 1) maximizing relative power through strategic leverage rather than territorial gain, 2) employing occupation as an instrument of coercive diplomacy, and 3) implementing hybrid control mechanisms that combine Soviet-era population management with modern information warfare. The study demonstrates how these mechanisms collectively undermine Ukrainian sovereignty while challenging traditional conflict resolution frameworks. This research provides the first comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding territorial occupation as a strategic weapon in contemporary great power competition, contributing to international relations theory by reconceptualizing occupation beyond traditional territorial control paradigms and offering practical insights for developing more effective international security mechanisms.
Keywords: Coercive diplomacy, great power politics, military occupation, Russia-Ukraine conflict, strategic culture, territorial control, weaponization

Instrumentalizacja okupacji: strategiczne wykorzystanie kontroli terytorialnej przez Rosję na Ukrainie

Streszczenie: Niniejsze badanie analizuje ewolucję rosyjskich strategii okupacji terytorialnej w Ukrainie, ukazując, w jaki sposób okupacja przekształciła się z tradycyjnego instrumentu ekspansji terytorialnej w zaawansowane narzędzie strategicznego przymusu we współczesnej polityce mocarstwowej. Wykorzystując jakościową metodologię studium przypadku, obejmującą analizę dokumentów, śledzenie procesów historycznych oraz syntezę ram teoretycznych, badanie integruje teorię realizmu ofensywnego, teorię dyplomacji przymusu oraz koncepcję kultury strategicznej w celu analizy rosyjskich strategii okupacyjnych w latach 2014–2025.

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Analiza wskazuje, że Rosja wypracowała złożone podejście do instrumentalizacji okupacji terytorialnej, wykraczające poza zwykłe przejęcie terytorium. Strategia ta funkcjonuje poprzez trzy mechanizmy: 1) maksymalizację względnej potęgi poprzez wykorzystanie strategicznej dźwigni zamiast bezpośrednich korzyści terytorialnych, 2) traktowanie okupacji jako instrumentu dyplomacji przymusu oraz 3) wdrażanie hybrydowych mechanizmów kontroli łączących sowieckie praktyki zarządzania ludnością z nowoczesnymi narzędziami wojny informacyjnej.

Badanie ukazuje, w jaki sposób mechanizmy te zbiorczo podważają suwerenność Ukrainy, jednocześnie kwestionując tradycyjne ramy rozwiązywania konfliktów. Opracowanie to przedstawia pierwszą kompleksową ramę teoretyczną umożliwiającą analizę okupacji terytorialnej jako narzędzia strategicznego we współczesnej rywalizacji mocarstwowej, wnosząc wkład do teorii stosunków międzynarodowych poprzez rekonceptualizację okupacji poza tradycyjnymi paradygmatami kontroli terytorialnej oraz oferując praktyczne wskazówki dotyczące tworzenia skuteczniejszych mechanizmów bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego.

Słowa kluczowe: dyplomacja przymusu, polityka mocarstwowa, okupacja wojskowa, konflikt rosyjsko-ukraiński, kultura strategiczna, kontrola terytorialna, instrumentalizacja

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