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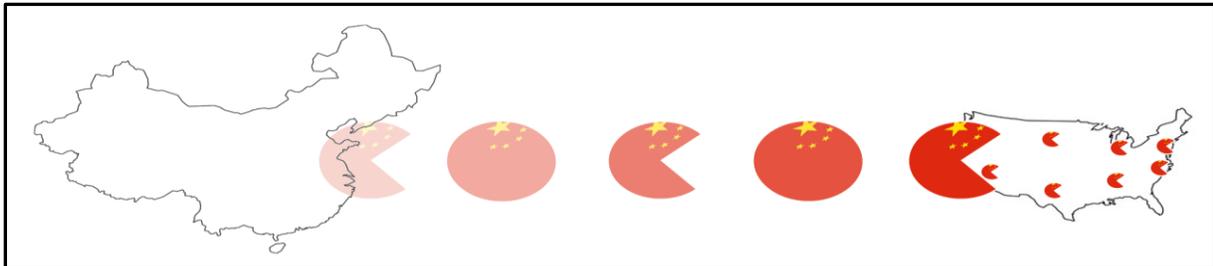
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Dismantling the Clausewitzian Trinity: How China is Eroding the Means and Will of the United States to Punch Back

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"I never skate to where the puck is, but to where it is going to be."—Wayne Gretzky



China is exporting its diaspora across the globe, which implements the Chinese Communist Party's strategy throughout all industries and parts of government. (Graphic designed by authors).

The threats that China¹ poses are elusive to both the casual observer and to the dedicated, military strategist. Contemporary military professionals are deciphering an integrated, irregular threat picture characterized by

- artifacts that *suggest* (not empirically prove) a threat template
- actions that are clandestine and often legal, but have the potential to be used maliciously
- new asymmetries in new domains (business, cyber, education, etc.) that aim to dismantle United States (US) military might without engaging it directly

By design, these often legal activities have limited objectives in order to not attract attention. In some cases, the stage is set, but the malicious use of a threat is not yet active. Whether they are legal or not, their clandestine nature means that we only

¹ Many of the Chinese strategies depicted in this article speak also for Russia, but the authors will maintain a focus on the Chinese Communist Party.

uncover a portion of these actions—often in hindsight—and we otherwise have just a mere *sense* that competition is heating up by observing an increased erosion of US hegemony and relative military power.

“It seems that China’s strategic aims are not oriented on building its military power, but instead on winning the next great war without a shot fired.”

Where seen with clarity, these so-called *irregular threats* are confusing and we are slow to react, leaving the United States skating “to where the puck is.” The relevance of our adversaries usurping relationships with important global partners in the form of economic deals, diplomacy, and military training often goes unnoticed.

Frequently overlooked, China undercuts America’s innovative advantage through the purposeful use of its diaspora in US research labs and universities, which eventually reduces the asymmetries that we can bring to the battlefield. Increasingly, irregular threats and competition below the level of armed conflict thrive in permissive environments—indeed within the homeland, create a multifaceted problem for the US military, and require globally integrated operations to protect the homeland and US interests. Taking all of this into consideration, it seems that China’s strategic aims are not oriented on building its military power, but instead on winning the next great war without a shot fired.

To achieve this aim, China seeks to dismantle the Clausewitzian Trinity (military, government, and people) by challenging US dominance indirectly through obscure methods. Attacking one of these elements inhibits America’s ability to compete; however, the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) strategies confront all three to undermine American competition. Each of these vertices has critical vulnerabilities in the web of links, nodes, and systems that indirectly sustain the US homeland and support national defense. **By investigating the impact on the US military, government, and people, the authors will arm the reader with a basic sense for the infinite manifestations of China’s strategy, with the aim of illuminating the threat that erodes America’s means and will to fight back.**

Military

Through the use of legal and illegal business dealings and information operations, China is able to erode the innovative technology that gives the US military an advantage over its adversaries. In an effort to dismantle the US military vertex, China pursues opportunities that mitigate US asymmetric advantage and our ability to sustain active combat operations.

Leveling the asymmetries the United States Brings to the battlefield. There are two critical vulnerabilities that China is exploiting to achieve this objective: access to weapons materials and our innovative edge.

“This activity is accomplished legally by way of business dealings or some kind of exploitation of US law.”

Achieving overmatch against the US arsenal is too costly and provocative for China to attempt directly. So, while investing in its own military, China simultaneously attempts to undercut US military strength. The CCP cannot undercut our military strength by stealing or destroying our strategic weapons—that is too hard a target and would provoke us into war. Instead, China maps out the critical capabilities of our arsenal and finds the more accessible elements that are two or three degrees separated from the final product: the active materials that make it work, how the weapon communicates with ground or space nodes, the process by which the weapon is made, how patent law can be exploited for emerging technologies, etc. For example, China has already started to dominate acquisition of key natural resources, such as the rare earth minerals, that feed the production lines of the US military’s technological capabilities and improvements.¹ In situations where China does not substantially control the resource, any shift in trade partner preference from the US to China degrades the supply chain, increases the price of the resource, and increases production costs and timelines. These degradations can occur indefinitely before being detected and can be challenging to correct, but they have an impact on the throughput of technological systems used by the US military.

In addition to measures taken to affect the US technological supply chain, China attempts to level US asymmetric advantage by undercutting our innovative edge. A large portion of this activity is accomplished legally by way of business dealings—often under company structures that do not easily tie back to the CCP—or some kind of exploitation of US law, like patent laws or our liberal visa system for study and research.² This legal access makes it easy to channel emerging technologies back to China before they have been implemented or sometimes patented. In other cases, undercutting our innovative edge involves cyber heists or insider intellectual theft. For instance, the United States considers artificial intelligence (AI) to be the next difference maker in defense.³ During the last 15 years, Google’s artificial intelligence ventures have outpaced its competition and attracted the attention of China—leading to a contentious history of Chinese attempts to unethically use and steal Google technology.⁴ This serves as only one of many vignettes where China has attempted to illegally benefit from US private industry. IBM, General Electric, and Apple—among others—have reported intellectual theft by Chinese employees as well.⁵ This theft and subsequent growth allows China to leverage powerful data aggregation and analysis technologies with a broad potential for malicious use.

Burdening the United States’ ability to sustain a fight. This objective can be achieved through myriad vectors, as sustaining a high-intensity conflict relies on almost all industries. Any time a CCP company owns infrastructure or a resource the US military relies on—or even when a loyal Chinese expat is working with these resources—that constitutes an *opportunity* for sabotage (obstruction or destruction) or subversion (systematic undermining or overthrow). Since both innocuous and malicious businesses can look the same, this is a good time to remind the reader that irregular

threats are characterized by artifacts that *suggest*, not prove, that they are threats. We must correct for confirmation bias and be intellectually honest as we discern what is an irregular threat versus a paranoid illusion like we saw with the Red Scare in the 1950s.

As with many clandestine operations, these predatory tactics are easily defeated once they are illuminated, because there are many means by which the US population and our allies can eliminate the access of malicious actors—mostly simple means like boycotting, divesting, and sanctioning.

The number of examples is too large to even scratch the surface on proving the point here, so we will focus on just three examples where the artifacts suggest that our ability to mobilize all aspects of our economy and sustain a fight could be threatened. China knows that even with pre-staged assets, a high-intensity conflict will require the United States to project force along maritime routes. Under its perfectly innocuous-sounding *Belt Road Initiative*, China owns a concerning number of ports along the United States' west coast and the Panama Canal's three mega-ports on both the Pacific and Atlantic entryways.⁶ As another example, China knows that a high-intensity conflict scenario would require the United States to rely largely on its own bread basket, but more and more of our farmland and meat industry is owned by the Chinese Communist Party, sparking alarm in US Congress when they labeled it a "national security risk."⁷ Finally, the United States relies on various networks to coordinate its joint force, from mustering forces to passing orders to ordering and tracking logistics movements—not to mention the automated operation and monitoring of our domestic infrastructure. It is difficult to discern the exact extent to which our networks are vulnerable, but both China and Russia have demonstrated the capability and willingness to access, manipulate, and disrupt our networks.⁸ In a high-intensity conflict scenario, just these three examples begin to show how China is building a "kill switch" that could poison, limit, or destroy the Chinese-owned portion [and more—like the parts of industry that rely on the Chinese portion] of these industries and eliminate our ability to sustain a fight, but even short of war, the Chinese Communist Party has the capacity to disrupt maritime commerce, pinch food supplies, or enact significant disruptions on our networked industries and markets.

As with many clandestine operations, these predatory tactics are easily defeated once they are illuminated, because there are many means by which the US population and our allies can eliminate the access of malicious actors—mostly simple means like boycotting, divesting, and sanctioning. Thus, accurately *detecting* the Chinese subversion vectors is the critical component to protecting and, where needed, regaining US military dominance.

The battle against US military strength exists outside of military battlefields where the military can legally defend itself. Instead, the battle wages against the other elements of national power and *within the American private sector, which falls under the purview of federal and state legislatures*. It is important to note the intent of the CCP using this purposeful navigation of the US legal code and our free market—while *disallowing*

foreign direct investment in China, which is an approach that spreads its tentacles through the Clausewitzian vertices of government and people.

Government

In an effort to diminish the strength of America's Clausewitzian vertex of *government*, China aims its irregular activities towards the objectives of (1) weakening the US government's ability to set and implement policy while (2) limiting US soft power with global partners.

A Weakened Ability to Set and Implement Policy. This objective tends to be the gold standard for attacking the *government* vertex of the Clausewitzian Trinity. The critical vulnerability undergirding a government's ability to implement any element of national power is *legitimacy*. The CCP wants to degrade legitimacy by attacking the values upon which America was founded, its leaders, and the ongoing methods of governance. These pillars of legitimacy are vulnerable by:

- Clouding public understanding of the structure, function, and laws of the US government
- Revising the history of America's founding⁹
- Disproportionately amplifying *real* or *perceived* inequities at the hand of the US government¹⁰
- Selectively using and misinterpreting facts
- Scapegoating
- Putting into question the fidelity of political leaders,¹¹ which, even if conclusively disproven in the eyes of some, is a potent form of disinformation

The primary *means* of achieving their objectives is through media/social media bombardment and the use of influential cultural icons like actors, athletes, and activists. This blend of *information saturation* and *credibility* that our adversaries use to muddy the social discourse in America could erode legitimacy in a way that puts all uses of national power in question and limits America's ability to implement foreign and domestic policy. It is important to note that the CCP will simultaneously improve its own image using these same tactics and take advantage of any naturally occurring events in America that already align with their objectives. The overall erosion of US government legitimacy squarely favors China, because it stifles the functioning of our institutions and occupies our political leaders with domestic turmoil.

Limiting US Soft Power with Global Partners. Using a different set of tactics and against a broad, global audience, China seeks to limit US soft power. The CCP preys upon the world's collective short-term memory, infringes on US partnerships, and makes the manipulation of international law normative. For the defenders of US interests, these tactics are among the more predictable and visible, as they fall in line with a playbook that China uses across the globe.

“Our adversaries know that when a partner of the United States meets a point of instability, they need to scramble to be the first friend, even if the solution they offer is not a great one.”

The first tactic aimed at limiting US soft power is to prey upon the world’s collective short term memory. China understands that a quick way to deter US retaliation against any wrongful action is to tell a lie, even if they know the lie will be outed the following week. The world’s collective memory is short-lived, so China can tell another lie the following week and keep the cycle of confusion going as long as they beat the lag time for truth to emerge. Russia employed this exact tactic after its invasion of Ukraine,¹² buying itself precious time as world observers failed to coalesce in resolve against the aggressors.¹³

Another tactic that supports this objective is infringing on long-standing US partnerships, particularly where America has strategic alliances and in countries geographically closest to the United States. This tactic comes in the form of either embarrassing the United States or befriending our partners. The most vivid and recent instance of embarrassment was the Taliban overthrow of the Afghan government. Not only does China have a history of working with the Taliban in both espionage and mining operations for copper and rare earth minerals,¹⁴ but supporting the Taliban’s swift overthrow of the Afghan government was the obvious choice to embarrass the United States during our withdrawal.¹⁵

When it comes to befriending our partners, the “foot in the door” method almost always comes in the form of economic opportunity or aid. If there is a hurricane in the Caribbean, China is happy to assist in rebuilding.¹⁶ Likewise, Russia was front and center when neighboring Mexico was struggling over damaged oil infrastructure and its response to the global pandemic.¹⁷ The tactic can be called *scrambling*. Our adversaries know that when a partner of the United States meets a point of instability, they need to scramble to be the *first* friend, even if the solution they offer is not a great one. It plays on the emotions of a country reeling in its time of need and leaves a very positive fingerprint in the name of America’s adversaries. The US approach, on the other hand, is stifled by bureaucracy and has a hard time keeping up. Using that approach to compete with our adversaries’ quick reactions costs us favor and soft power with strategic allies.²

People

China’s primary objective with regard to the US population is to undercut the US resolve to fight, and that comes in the form of both sowing dissatisfaction with the US government, as well as placing the CCP and Chinese culture in a positive light. In particular, China attempts to establish itself as an innocuous and benevolent nation to

² This assertion does not weigh this cost against all of the things the U.S. does to win favor with strategic allies, nor what is gained in credibility by offering sound solutions even if they emerge more slowly. The authors are unable to assess whether the U.S. is trending towards gaining or losing favor in the aggregate.

the average American voter by targeting three critical vulnerabilities—the general population, education, and business—in the hope that Americans will be more likely to protest US actions than to seek war with China.

Influence on the American population. Under President Xi, external propaganda work has become a top priority of the CCP, with China carefully curating its use of information, misinformation, and disinformation. In 2010, journalist Xiong Min stated “the right to speak in the world is not distributed equally,” and “eighty percent of information is monopolized by Western media.” She said it was time to end that monopoly by means of what China has called the Grand External Propaganda Campaign (GEPC).¹⁸ The campaign began as an anti-CNN movement to prevent distortion of what China wanted to portray as its international image. At the August 2018 National Meeting on Ideology and Propaganda, President Xi stated: “To present good images, we should improve our international communication capability, tell China’s stories well, disseminate China’s voice, show an authentic media and beneficent China to the world, and raise the country’s soft power and the influence of Chinese culture.”¹⁹

In the last ten years, China has invested billions in US information powerhouses in an attempt to influence the American population, using news, sports, movies, TV, and the internet as the primary vectors. Below is an accounting of just *some* of the infosphere conduits the CCP has developed so that it can have near-continuous contact with individuals in its target populations:

China and its proxy companies have majority-controlled ownership in nearly 2,400 US companies.²⁰ In the media realm this includes a \$150 million investment in Reddit, which allowed China to remove the most popular pro-Trump subreddit from the registry. The social media app, TikTok, allows China a direct-to-population conduit for Chinese content and ideology. China’s Tencent Music Entertainment owns ten percent in Universal Music Group Music and significant chunks of video game producers, as well as a \$150 million investment into Discord, a video game chatroom—all of which equates to hundreds of millions of users. The CCP’s Wanda Group owns AMC Theaters and Legendary Entertainment Group, equaling control of more than 8,000 American theater screens and other media platforms, allowing China to project soft power and block unflattering depictions of the Chinese government from being presented.²¹

China has used its ownership in these companies and control of the media to influence stories, change actors, and change plots. China’s western media ownership represents a large umbrella of what influences America’s youth: music, movies, and video games. It seems that China is pursuing a long-term propaganda strategy to change the American strategic narrative, subvert the cultural fabric of America, and endear China in a way that Americans would have trouble supporting a fight against the country.

Education. China is the greatest source of foreign students to the United States, and there is evidence of “politically-motivated attempts by Chinese Communist Party entities and a small number of Chinese students to infringe on the academic freedom and personal safety of university persons at American universities.”²² There are numerous

instances of CCP officials based at Chinese Embassies and Consulates within the United States attempting to access, influence, or terminate academic activities involving content sensitive to China, such as invitations for the Dalai Lama to speak or group discourse over Taiwan or Hong Kong freedom.²³ These attempts have taken the form of complaints against universities, pressure on experts to change their views, visa denials to China, grant and funding denials, and encouragement for university faculty to lean more in China's direction. Accompanying the pro-China narrative are also the narratives that the CCP supports in American education that lead us to focus on our differences within the population, rather than our common purpose and values—a move to degrade the strength of a country that is straight out of the Marxist playbook. As much as the American public would want to believe that our higher education system is impervious to pay-to-play influence, the overarching problem for universities when it comes to dealing with undue or malign influence from China is the growing economic dependence of universities on large numbers of Chinese students, and that dependence is a strong lever in dictating the topics and bias of a university's curriculum.²⁴

Business. Business is the lever arm by which the Chinese Communist Party ensures the Grand External Propaganda Campaign executes without impediment. Ideally, business in a free market allows people to weigh ventures not only against return on investment forecasts, but also against one's moral values. Therefore, business should not be a lever that China can pull to influence the American people, but with a population of 1.4 billion, the CCP can make it very painful for businesses that do not fall in line with the GEPC narrative. The National Basketball Association (amid plummeting viewership) and its most prominent player, LeBron James, serve as an example of how powerful this leverage can be. As stalwarts of the social justice movement, their moral compass on civil rights was clear. However, while defending the CCP against the Houston Rockets general manager's support for freedom in Hong Kong, they were willing to overlook China's brutal tactics in Hong Kong and the enslavement of millions of Uyghur Muslims.²⁵ Separately, it is probably not a mere coincidence that Maverick's leather jacket will no longer have the flag of Taiwan on it when *Top Gun: Maverick* releases this November.²⁶

More examples of how the GEPC intentionally coordinates business and diplomacy come from Australia. When Australia announced an independent investigation into the coronavirus, China threatened Australia's tourist market and targeted its beef and barley exports, stating Chinese tourists would have "second thoughts and parents would reconsider 'whether this is the best place to send their kids,' while ordinary consumers would ask, 'Why should we drink Australian wine? Eat Australian beef?'"²⁷ When Australia persisted, China banned beef for "technical reasons," accounting for 35 percent of Australia's beef exports, and placed 80 percent tariffs on barley on the basis of an 18-month-long anti-dumping and countervailing duties investigation.²⁸ Australia ended its push for an investigation independent of the World Health Organization.

On the surface, this global economic advancement by way of business and trade is the type of expansion the United States supports. However, the power China gains over physical resources, influential companies, and meaningful portions of gross domestic product in various countries, including the United States, enables power over public opinion, our impression of the CCP, and our ability to resist Chinese influence.

In its approach to undercutting the will of the American people to war with China, the CCP has set up a campaign that injects positive narratives regarding China, and negative or divisive American narratives. Those seeking to illuminate the truth behind China's authoritarian regime are met with intense pressure from the CCP's pervasive trade and business sectors in an effort to compel massive businesses and media platforms back into compliance. The examples of Chinese Communist Party influence are ubiquitous within the United States, and it falls on each of us to not be passive consumers of information, but vigilant seekers of truth as we navigate the infosphere.

Conclusion

"The sky is full of stars, and the world is run by those who can make constellations of them."—Unknown

Activities aimed at reshaping the international order set the background of Americans' everyday lives, constituting the slow advance of adversary strategic aims. China conducts influence operations targeting cultural institutions, media outlets, business, industry, academia, the government, and the military. This is done to erode US credibility, influence our political system, degrade our economy, and undermine national security.²⁹ These irregular tactics pose a significant risk to the US military, government, and people—the three vertices of the Clausewitzian Trinity that must be aligned for a nation to wage war.

To the extent that irregular threats are typically legal and clandestine, none of the methods for dismantling the US trinity depicted here can be empirically proven. Instead, the references throughout this article represent artifacts that *could* be interpreted as malicious and in no case can one determine the success level of these adversarial efforts, representing an unquantifiable risk. However, as Stuart Diamond notes in *Getting More*, the difference between a good baseball batter with an average of .280 and a Hall of Fame batter with an average of .310 is just one extra hit every nine games.³⁰ All told, China and Russia's attacks below the threshold of war have not completely dismantled the US trinity, but they put enough pressure on America's diplomatic game to cause missed opportunities, and they inflame internal discord enough to make the government inwardly focused and a little overwhelmed; maybe that all equates to an extra hit every nine games.

A Call to Action

Irregular threats, left unimpeded, will undercut the US resolve to fight, stifle the strength of the American economy, reduce our innovative advantage, and damage global opinions regarding America. The most advantageous thing for China and Russia would be for America to continue to not see the relentless assault—and the authors say *relentless assault* not with emotion, but in an attempt to accurately characterize it—these countries are committing on our *will* and *means* to retaliate. In fact, these countries have seen the power of American vengeance so many times throughout history that they are very carefully avoiding any "flash in the pan" that would galvanize our resolve. So, while the right approach to these irregular threats remains unclear, seeing the threats with clarity and acknowledging their purpose broadly across American society—not just within isolated military and government circles—must

happen now. The call to action for any American reading this is to walk away knowing and committed to the following:

- There are infinite manifestations of the new strategies in new domains.³
- Become a student of the nature of these irregular threats and practice uncovering the malicious potential of a seemingly innocuous action.
- Be wide-eyed about the potential threats within great power competition, but intellectually honest as to your level of fidelity that they are actually threats.

While the primary battlefield for these irregular threats exists within the private sector and U.S. legal code, the US military ought not be a passive observer. Understanding the complexity for the Department of Defense, some likely candidates for addressing irregular threats and leading progress towards detecting, mitigating, and defeating them are US Cyber Command and US Special Operations Command. Cyber Command holds this distinction more and more in a world where decisive operations can conceivably come in the cyber domain. The US Special Operations Command is a likely candidate as the global integrator for actions against irregular threats, due to special operations forces' training in irregular and unconventional warfare activities that include an understanding of complexity and human terrain. At the individual level, every Service Member has a role in expanding one's absorptive capacity for complexity and accounting for the myriad threats to our military.

Beyond the Department of Defense, irregular warfare requires a whole of government approach, and thus the US national security apparatus must evolve to effectively compete against these amorphous, hidden threats that do not readily appear on the American radar. It is our sincere hope that this message goes beyond military circles and inspires an active vigilance by those who daily walk the battlefield of irregular threats.

Disclaimer. The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense or any other agency of the Federal Government.

¹ "China Dominates the Rare Earths Supply Chain." IER, August 5, 2020, accessed October 17, 2020. <https://www.instituteforenergyresearch.org/international-issues/china-dominates-the-rare-earths-supply-chain/>.

² Edward Wong and Julian E. Barnes, "U.S. to Expel Chinese Graduate Students with Ties to China's Military Schools," New York Times, 3 December, 2020, accessed 3 August 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/us/politics/china-hong-kong-trump-student-visas.html>.

³ House Armed Services Committee, Future of Defense Task Force Report 2020 (Washington DC: House Armed Services Committee, September 2020); Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the Secretary of Defense, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress (Washington DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020).

³ This article is barely able to scratch the surface on how these strategies are employed in every industry and across the elements of national power. It is incumbent upon the reader to gain a sense for the strategies through these illustrations and then extrapolate how they may be manifested in your surroundings.

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⁵ Eric Rosenbaum, "1 in 5 Corporations Say China Has Stolen Their IP within the Last Year: CNBC CFO Survey," CNBC, March 1, 2019, accessed October 17, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/28/1-in-5-companies-say-china-stole-their-ip-within-the-last-year-cnbc.html#:~:text=01%2C%202018.&text=There%20are%20no%20exact%20statistics,U.S.%20economy%20from%20these%20actions.>

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¹¹ The Editorial Board, "The Bidens and China Business," The Wall Street Journal, October 20, 2020, Accessed October 21, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-bidens-and-china-business-11603236651>; Mark A. Thiessen, "Opinion: The Poetic Justice in Eric Swalwell's Relationship with a Chinese Spy," The Washington Post, December 10, 2020, Accessed August 3, 2021,

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¹³ Kathy Lally, "Putin's Remarks Raise Fears of Future Moves Against Ukraine". The Washington Post, April 17, 2015, accessed 28 October 28, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/putin-changes-course-admits-russian-troops-were-in-crimea-before-vote/2014/04/17/b3300a54-c617-11e3-bf7a-be01a9b69cf1_story.html.

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