

January 2017 Topic Analysis

Resolved: In order to better respond to international conflicts, the United States should significantly increase its military spending.

The January resolution is another straightforward topic with clear advocacy for the pro and the con teams. Of course, there are always multiple perspectives on a topic and this one promises to be no different. The topic analysis below will give you some ideas on where to get started researching and what some of those main arguments will be in the rounds ahead.

Let's look at the terms of the resolution. The very first phrase, "In order to better respond to international conflicts", certainly provides some areas for disagreement. There are at least two ways in which this phrase can become an issue in the round. First, in traditional public forum debate, the question posed by the resolution is one to be answered in a holistic manner. Pro teams may be inspired to highlight specific international conflicts, and con teams may attempt to hold pro teams to specific international conflicts a standard. The real framing of the round may be to articulate international conflicts beyond what we can see right now and how our military may respond going forward. Of course that sounds crazy, but we are talking about an issue of scarcity regarding our government's resources, ability, and willingness to pay for increased spending. Many debaters love to argue on empirical research and with good reason. But it is much harder to argue about spending money without a clear idea of what the money is going toward regarding a specific threat. *Alas, isn't that the fundamental job of the military, to be ready for any event threatening national security, whether it is seen in the distance or thrust upon us without warning?* One way to approach this phrase is to look at the world around us. Are we able to respond to international conflicts right now? What has the recent past shown us? What does the future look like based on where we are now – is our world a safer place now in the last 30 years than it was compared to the first half of the twentieth century?

The second question involving the first phrase in the resolution really deals with the context of our times right now. Our President-Elect has repeatedly stated he wants to increase military spending, but at the same time he has made overtures suggesting that the role of the US in international relations may be moving toward a more isolationist policy. The CATO Institute is one of probably many organizations offering explanations and insight to what a President Trump may do with foreign policy, and this is a good place to start.^[1] Thus the question that may rear its head in rounds is whether the US should even be responding to international conflicts. An effective con strategy may be to place a burden on the pro demanding that they show the US should be responding to relatively minor international conflicts in the first place, or even that the US will want to respond. Of course, the resolution also deals with this issue by placing "should" in its second half. Should the US spend more? Should the US be involved more in international conflicts? That's one really interesting angle to this topic right now as our new administration is grappling with some of the same issues.

The second half of the resolution's wording is another trap waiting to happen. We need to look at military spending holistically. The phrasing is reminiscent of a policy resolution that asks for a plan and unleashes a number of topicality arguments on whether an increase in spending is significant or not. Public forum resolutions should not focus on creating an actual significant plan per se, but could

argue for positions already being developed in the status quo, such as the Third Offset, which will be mentioned below.

One could argue the resolution is truly a discussion of military readiness in light of unforeseen future international challenges. Teams may embrace or shy away from this interpretation, but it is at least worth exploring. Clarke and Serena offer insight into what military readiness means in 2016, and how it has evolved in recent years.[\[2\]](#)

PRO

Pro teams may look at what international conflicts are out there to get an idea of what the military may need to address in the future. The Council of Foreign Relations Global Conflict Tracker[\[3\]](#) provides insight on current global conflicts and offers an assessment on each incident's impacts on US interests. Additionally, Kagan gives thought "on what I believe to be the greatest threats that we are going to face in the years and decades, and those are threats posed by China and Russia."[\[4\]](#)

After looking for international crisis that could pull our military in, we need to look at the state of our military. One reference to look at is Defense One's State of Defense 2016 article.[\[5\]](#) The authors highlight the give and take in the focus of military operations and changing expectations. The article is from the end of 2015 but is still relevant today. Perhaps an update will come out before the end of January. The Heritage Foundations 2016 Index of US Military Strength is another solid resource for the topic.[\[6\]](#) The article discusses current threats but also addresses the effects of the Budget Control Act (BCA) of 2011 and the effects to the different military branches. There seems to be plenty of impact opportunities within this broad, diverse document. For more information on the BCA of 2011 and its effect on the defense industry debaters should turn to the Center for Strategic and International Studies article by Harrison looking at the impacts 5 years in to sequestration.[\[7\]](#)

Next, pro teams need to start piecing together reasons why we need to increase military spending. Salam posits the US needs to spend more on its military for the future of the US and its allies.[\[8\]](#) One of the interesting sources used by Salam is Posen's Command of the Commons article.[\[9\]](#) The article is dated 2003 but gives an excellent perspective on US hegemony going forward at that time. Johnson in the National Interest works to debunk some of the main arguments for cutting military spending. [\[10\]](#)

Another strong area for pro teams to explore is the Third Offset being advanced within the Department of Defense.[\[11\]](#) The program focuses on creating a gap between US military capabilities and its adversaries, China and Russia. Teams will want to research the first two offsets to gain a comprehensive understanding of the motivations being undertaken by the US military. As always, teams need to be careful in linking arguments back to the resolution. Do we need to increase military spending to ensure the Third Offset comes to fruition? Freedberg writes that the aforementioned BCA will prevent the Third Offset from complete implementation.[\[12\]](#)

Another trending issue right now pro teams will need to deal with is the Washington Post article claiming the Pentagon could save billions of dollars over a five-year period.[\[13\]](#) Friedman argues the report misguided "The major basis for the report's estimated savings is its claim that DoD should be able to replicate private-sector "productivity gains" of 4–8 percent annually. But that assumption shows fundamental confusion about government... But true savings, even the efficiency sort where you

do the same missions for less cost, don't come for nothing. Efficiency savings include [closing bases](#), [combining](#) or [shuttering](#) combatant commands, [cutting](#) a nuclear-weapons delivery system, [lowering personnel costs](#) and the like. All require political fights. [\[14\]](#)

CON

One con position is to argue the US already possess the best military in the world, and that allows it to be more prepared than any other military in the world. In and of itself, this does not answer the question posed by the resolution, but certainly allows con teams to argue that any significant increase only increases the already substantial American edge in international military spending. This raises the important question of the value American or international security might derive from this increase. To get a deeper understanding of this issue look to a series of articles on military readiness that flesh out some of the key arguments. General Petraeus and O'Hanlon argue that US military readiness crisis is a myth and the US military is ready for battle. [\[15\]](#) Their analysis set off the following response from Ham:

Underfunding and overworking today's force has long-term implications. Given the cloudy forecast for military budgets, it is hard to see when the Army might achieve overall readiness levels at acceptable risk. Unless readiness reaches sufficient levels, the Army won't be able to address another looming crisis involving the need to modernize its weapons, communications, vehicles and aircraft to stay ahead of competitors and potential adversaries. [\[16\]](#)

O'Hanlon responded again, this time to answer Ham's critique directly, "In short, there is no readiness crisis requiring dramatic policy intervention. Luckily, for those would-be adversaries who might be listening to our debate, there is therefore also no window of opportunity to exploit in America's ability to defend its global interests." [\[17\]](#) Teams would be wise to look for this on-going dialogue debating public policy. Some public forum topics do not have the same back and forth as this one does, and the rapid change in dynamics is potentially there for this debate as the new administration takes hold. A couple more thoughts about O'Hanlon relative to the January topic. He did write a policy paper for Foreign Policy at Brookings in 2013 detailing potential military spending cuts forced by the sequestration. [\[18\]](#) Additionally, as recently as fall of 2016 he has advocated moderate military spending increases, not significant. [\[19\]](#) Remember, Pro teams must prove there should be a significant increase in spending. That is an important tenet within the resolution and one idea that con teams can certainly use to their advantage.

Con teams may also approach the resolution by attacking the "international conflicts" phrase of the resolution. Larison puts forth the argument that our allies need to be more financially invested in their own military defense, and the US needs to be more selective in how it engages other countries. [\[20\]](#) Preble continues the argument with an observation from the Republican presidential debates from last year, "the candidates have largely avoided a serious discussion of the U.S. military's roles and missions. For the most part, they reflect the elite consensus that U.S. power is essential to the functioning of the international system." [\[21\]](#) Preble and others wish for that discussion of the role of our military to be defined before committing more money to the Pentagon. Con teams may certainly play up the ambiguity of what types of missions the military would undertake, and let judges decide if that is a reasonable use of tax dollars and military might. It probably would not be a bad research idea to look at some of the Republican candidates' different defense philosophies from last year. Now that

Republicans hold the executive and legislative branch there is a chance of a consistent message on military spending going forward.

Another interesting angle on the topic for con teams is the issue of military waste. The Pentagon report outlining substantial waste has already been mentioned; there are other examples of poor use of funds. Krieg provides a list of examples from 2015 alone that may play well with lay judges who may remember the initial stories.[\[22\]](#) Leo and Ehley write that the military has failed to account for trillions of dollars over the last twenty years.[\[23\]](#) Con teams may have the proverbial field day researching examples of government waste; thus, arguing any significant increases must first demonstrate accountability. That would be a tough burden for a pro team to prove.

Additionally, con teams may argue there is a lack of congressional support for reigning in budgets, thus the US is either spending more than it needs to right now or not being efficient with the funds they have. Murline identified “The Pentagon is under pressure to cut the military budget but is facing push-back from members of Congress on issues ranging from pay rates and force size to weapons and base closures.”[\[24\]](#) Indeed, as recently as early 2016, public opinion surveys indicated support for military spending cuts among the voters, but not among the politicians.[\[25\]](#)

Con teams also need to prepare for whatever pro teams throw out there. It is certainly expected that some pro teams may also argue military spending is good for the economy, especially job creation. However, Schwellenbach identifies that spending on social programs is a better job creator than military spending.[\[26\]](#) Even the Third Offset has its critics. The program is supposed to serve as a deterrent to our main military rivals but it may have actually pushed Russia and China to immediately increase their military expenditures.[\[27\]](#)

The January resolution will be an excellent topic for debaters to engage around. I commend the NSDA for giving us a topic so vital and relevant. There are certainly some stock topics that will flesh out the contentions for most teams, but there is still enough wiggle room for creative teams to put together interesting and thought provoking cases. From a judge perspective, most judges will have a stronger connection and opinion on this topic compared to our last two topics on IoT and Plan Colombia. That wrinkle will certainly leave another variable on the table during the round as judge perception will play a bigger role than we may be comfortable with. Best of luck to all this month!