



## PUBLIC FORUM DEBATE

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# JANUARY 2026 TOPIC ANALYSIS



## About the Topic Analysis

*This document aims to provide a brief introduction to the new topic to students and coaches. The provided analysis is not intended to be used to limit topic interpretation. We encourage all students to conduct additional independent research to explore additional viewpoints, arguments and strategies.*

*All participants are expected to create an environment conducive to open discourse, where all points of view are considered, and interactions are conducted with respect. Students, as always, should uphold the [Code of Honor](#) and rules set forth in the [Unified Manual](#) when developing and presenting their arguments on this topic.*

## How We Choose Our Topics

*Each month, NSDA students and coaches vote between two resolutions to determine the month's resolution.*

*A total of **681 coaches** and **3,127 students** voted for the resolution. The winning resolution received **67% of the coach vote** and **62% of the student vote**.*

*Resolution language is developed through the Public Forum wording committee. Comprised of coaches and alumni, the committee evaluates topic suggestions submitted by students and coaches in order to write a slate of potential resolutions in line with the [NSDA topic rubric](#).*

*Suggest potential topics for the next school year and vote for future topics at the [NSDA topic creation hub](#)!*

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# Resolved: The People's Republic of China should substantially reduce its international extraction of natural resources.

## Definitions

Unlike the last topic, this resolution is a bit more straightforward in its terms. I have included definitions of each of the relevant terms of the resolution below.

**"The People's Republic of China":** The country that governs mainland China, not to be confused with the "Republic of China". It is one of the world's largest economies, has one of the world's largest populations, and plays a substantial role in geopolitical issues.

**"should":** In a debate context, the word should is defined as a word used to express obligation, or a word used to say or ask what is the correct or best thing to do ([Cambridge](#)). The word "should" in a debate resolution requires that debaters imagine a world where the action proposed in the resolution happens, then debate about whether that thing would be a good or bad idea.

**"substantially reduce":** Substantially means "to a large degree" according to Cambridge. In a debate context, this generally does not have a precise, quantitative definition; but rather asks the debaters to qualitatively justify their arguments as impactful rather than limited in scope. Reduce means to decrease in size, amount, or degree. Taken together, debaters must defend a decrease in size, amount, or extent of China's international extraction of natural resources that is large enough to be impactful.

**"international":** involving more than one country (Cambridge). In this context, the term limits the resolution to extraction of natural resources done outside of China's sovereign territory.

**"extraction":** In the context of natural resources, extraction refers to the process of removing natural resources from the environment, such as mining, drilling, or logging operations.

**"natural resources":** Cambridge defines this term as "things such as minerals, forests, coal etc. that exist in a place and can be used by people" or "...have economic value to a country." In this resolution's context, this would refer to things like oil, natural gas, coal, lumber, metals, or rare earth elements (though this is not an exhaustive list!).

## Overview

Welcome to 2026! The first January topic sees some fierce debate across very large local, regional, and national tournaments, with the season really ramping up after the winter break. After debating about the European Union in September/October and domestic policing in November/December, the January topic sees us pivoting to the Eastern hemisphere to debate about the economic and environmental implications of China's resource extraction.

Many Public Forum topics of the past few years have addressed China's geopolitical rise to some degree: the three most recent being last year's topic regarding American military support of Taiwan, the September/October 2023 topic regarding American military presence in the Arctic, and November/December 2022's topic regarding great power competition. The complex and often contentious geopolitical relationship between the United States and China is one of the most significant storylines in international relations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; as a result, it is one of the most often-explored Public Forum topics. However, this resolution situates China at the heart of a different global controversy that is far less focused on its relationship with the West: the consequences of its overseas mining, drilling, and other resource extraction efforts.

The fundamental question explored by this topic concerns the extent to which Chinese resource extraction efforts are intertwined with the global economy; in particular, the economies of many developing nations. As one of the world's largest economies and geopolitical players, China relies heavily on overseas extraction efforts to secure minerals to drive continued growth, such as cobalt, copper, and rare earth elements. These extraction efforts require incredibly complex systems that implicate many stakeholders; as a result, successful debaters on this topic will need to deftly and succinctly explain how these systems function, who stands to benefit, and how one action can spark chain reactions through the rest of the systems. For instance: would affirming the resolution reduce Chinese extraction stimulate local industry to fill the void with more sustainable alternatives, or lead to a vacuum that other global players are quick to fill? Would countries presently signing economic agreements with China see benefits associated with a minimization of environmental damage, or suffer lost jobs and investment? How would the resolution affect global supply chains, climate goals, and human rights initiatives? There are no easy answers to any of these questions, and successful debaters on this topic will need to grapple with these complex themes to emerge victorious throughout this month.

The pro side will contend that many of these agreements are exploitative, negatively impacting the local environment, economy, and government. Pro debaters will argue that China scaling back their international commitments would pave the way for more responsible and less destructive local governance, contributing to a more sustainable future, especially for

developing economies that are vulnerable to China's trade tactics. The con side will likely contend that there would be substantial disruptions to local economies due to a sudden reduction in these trade agreements – with countries across the world suddenly scrambling to find a new source of investment in their local industry and facing a major economic contraction. Additionally, the con will argue that other powers would take notice of China's retrenchment, sparking new conflicts where China was previously a stabilizing force.

Best of luck as you begin competing in the new year! We wish you the best in your debates this month, and hope you enjoy learning more about an incredibly complex issue.

## Pro Arguments

### Environment

China operates several large-scale mines, oil fields, and logging operations across multiple continents, such as those in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Peru, Myanmar, and in the Amazon. Many of these projects have [faced stiff criticism](#) surrounding their impacts on the environment; not just from Western organizations, but from international watchdog organizations and affected communities. These allegations include deforestation, soil erosion, heavy metal pollution. For example, [this article](#) criticizes Chinese mining in West Africa, and [this article](#) criticizes China's mining and logging operations in the Congo Basin. There are no shortage of authors criticizing nearly every major project that China has initiated. Pro debaters would be smart to clearly tailor their arguments to specific environmental harms and make sure their advocacy centers China's involvement in these deals as the primary issue to pre-emptively address con arguments about worse actors filling in the void left behind.

### Human Rights and Labor

Both [these articles](#) and the links above outline human rights concerns associated with many natural resource extraction projects led by China around the world. Across these projects, many NGOs, journalists, and researchers have blown the whistle on unsafe working conditions, excessive work hours, inadequate compensation, and inadequate protections against forced and child labor. Additionally, many of these extraction projects are situated near or in existing local communities, who often [report intimidation tactics](#), [forced displacement](#) and other violence from security personnel hired to protect those projects.

### Governance

Beyond direct impacts from the projects themselves, other organizations have also pointed to concerns about the nature of these economic agreements. [China has been criticized for the negotiation process](#) of many of these deals, often conducted behind closed doors with limited transparency with the host communities and legislators and [benefitting elites](#). This includes agreements for resource extraction that are often bundled with large infrastructure loans that [receiving countries struggle to pay off](#). Critics of these deals have contended that China can exert leverage based on these deals to compromise local oversight and renegotiate terms that extend extraction rights beyond the scope of the original agreement, negatively impacting the host country in a process [frequently referred to as “debt trapping”](#). Pro teams should articulate

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that a world where China backed off many of these agreements would be a world where these harms were far less substantial.

## Con Arguments

### Economy

The core con argument will concern the economic effects of unwinding many of these trade deals. I have broken this section down into two areas: the effects of a pro ballot on developing economies, and the effects of a pro ballot on China's economy.

#### Developing Economies

While the pro side has many strong arguments rooted in legitimate criticism of these trade deals, the con side has strong arguments relating to what would happen because of these trade deals being substantially reduced. For many of the countries articulated above, China is the primary trading partner and often the only investor willing to take on relatively risky and challenging projects in their territory. Many countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America [rely on Chinese capital to develop their economies](#) (and many authors, including the previous link and [others](#), call into question the pro's arguments about debt-trapping). Alternative financing from Europe and the United States is [often conditional and nominally smaller](#), making it insufficient to grow these economies. Because of this lack of an alternative, projects that support thousands of jobs, generate revenue for the local economy, and [come with substantial investment in local infrastructure](#) that helps other businesses grow are often fundamentally dependent on China. A substantial reduction in these projects, the con should argue, would leave many governments suddenly without this vital partner, slowing economic growth and industrialization and causing catastrophic impacts.

#### China's Economy

The economic pain would likely not stop in the developing world. The bedrock of the Chinese economy has become [industrial production based on the natural resources extracted from these deals](#). As a result, a reduction in these inputs would likely stunt the growth of China's economy, especially when [analyzing China's growth](#) over the past few years. A sudden strain for natural resources would leave the global superpower struggling to create new supply chains to meet its voracious demand. There are several different inputs the con team can zero in on to make their case: for example, [this article](#) articulates the importance of minerals to the Chinese economy. In essence, many rare earth elements are – as the name implies – rare, only accessible to China through these trade deals. Sudden decreases in supply of these elements could also complicate international efforts to expand green energy and technology, creating worse environmental effects than those criticized by the pro. And, con teams could lean on the

time-tested argument that economic shocks also lead to less deployment of new green technology.

### Fill-In

Many pro strategies may struggle to articulate who might fill the void left by China should it scale back these commitments. Other state and private actors may be even less accountable to the local government than China, compounding the problems the pro side attempts to address; and competition between these groups may inflame existing geopolitical tensions and destabilize the regions. This argument can either be used as a contention in and of itself, or as a rebuttal answer to many of the pro's arguments – the cure might be worse than the affliction.