

2017 SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER TOPIC ANALYSIS

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September-October 2017 Topic Update

Overall, the September/October Public Forum topic has lived up its summer hype. It always promised to be a topic that required constant updates, constant reading of Trump's tweets, and constant fear for what actually might happen in the region. I have been able to judge almost forty rounds on the topic and have seen quite a bit of argumentation from various areas in the country. I have judged at both National Debate Forum institutes in July and four tournaments in September including the University of Kentucky (KY), Myers Park High School (NC), Vestavia Hills High School (AL), and Holy Cross School (LA).

I will break this mid-topic analysis up into three areas. First, I will discuss the upsides of the resolution from what I've seen. Second, I will discuss the downsides of the resolution based on what I've observed in the rounds I've judged. Lastly, I will discuss potential avenues for research heading into the final weeks of the topic.

The Upsides of the Resolution

Anti-Missile Systems was the right wording.

One of the hesitations when this topic was announced was in regards to what the affirmative advocacy looked like. Most teams assumed that the topic was a THAAD – Terminal High Altitude Area Defense – advocacy. However, I have been thoroughly impressed by teams on the affirmative research into the other anti-missile systems. AEGIS and Patriot batteries have provided quite a bit of additional ground to the affirmative, and the interoperability debates have been exciting. Many teams have recognized that these systems may be flawed as individual systems, but when used together create a multi-layered approach to the solution.

Versions of the War

The best topic adaptation over the past couple of weeks has been the negative's version of what a war would look like. With the threats ramping up from North Korea, every affirmative seemed to create the same narrative – "war is coming" and "we need defense in this war". This seemed to be a pretty good narrative, one that many predicted would happen during the summer if North Korea continued advancing their missile tests. The negative's version of the war as an artillery launch, chemical weapon attack, or another scenario really tests the thesis of this narrative. The artillery launch is a quite popular negative argument in the rounds I have judged.

The Downsides of the Resolution

Overreliance on old evidence

My biggest complaint about the topic has been judging teams reading evidence from March or April. This topic has changed significantly in last six weeks, arguably more than any other topic I've coached in more than a decade of public forum. For instance, when we started in the

summer, Chinese sanctions were merely a concept being thrown out by negative teams as a different advocacy to impede North Korea's nuclear development. By mid-September, China was ramping up their own sanctions and many affirmative teams were claiming anti-missile systems as the reason behind these sanctions. All of a sudden, we had a major ground shift and it seemed as though no one really batted an eye. This topic requires teams to constantly pay attention to not only our foreign policy, but also South Korea's foreign policy decisions as they relate to North Korean provocations.

Don't settle for the Elleman evidence about interoperability – challenge yourself to research and find new cards about how the systems work together. Research different war game scenarios written about North Korea and how anti-missile systems would be used. Pay attention to what the big authors are doing currently – for instance, it's not like Doug Bandow stopped writing about North Korea back in June. He just did a lecture on how we could defend South Korea from a North Korea missile launch at the University of Georgia the first week of October. While you read this, you should be thinking about the arguments you have read at every tournament and take a quick glance at your favorite search engine or database and see if that author has updated their view.

It is hard to keep everything going on in the region straight, but I challenge teams to do a better job of knowing about the region before you debate. As someone who has been paying close attention to exactly what Xi and Moon are doing, I have a comfortable knowledge of the policies being pursued. Unfortunately, I have seen teams rely on what Xi was doing in August as their position to answer Xi based arguments. Each week in practices, you should dedicate at least one day to understanding how the topic has developed in the past week and how that affects your blocks, your cases, and your overall narrative in the debate.

Underdevelopment of “South Korea's Interests”

It seems that any time we have a resolution that poses a limitation on the debaters, the debaters ignore it. While the development of the topic has made war seem to become more inevitable – it seems that more teams have just collapsed on life as the only South Korean interest that matters in the debate. I am concerned that we are skipping the framers' intent. It seems many teams are still arguing from a United States perspective, and not from a South Korean perspective. There are still protests going on daily in South Korea in response to THAAD. China, although more cooperative, is still not happy with THAAD's installation. While the United States has heavily focused on South Korea, that may have distanced another major regional ally in Japan, affecting the trilateral relationship of the United States, South Korea, and Japan.

Teams could be highly successful, in my opinion, in the last weeks on the topic if they pursue a route to the ballot via South Korea's interests. If you have been debating or researching a lot on this topic, you may feel like an expert in anti-missile systems, but I guarantee you are not an expert in South Korean interests. Shift your attention over the next couple of weeks to see if you may learn something new that helps you adjust your framing.

Potential Uncharted Avenues of the Topic

Interoperability is because of the radars, not the systems.

Lately, I've focused much of my personal research on understanding how interoperability is achieved. It's not that AEGIS talks to THAAD, or vice versa. Interoperability is a result of the data being shared not only between US systems, but between the allies in the region. The data is a result of the advanced radar systems. Most teams exclusively look at the advanced radar system on THAAD, but haven't looked at the Japanese AEGIS advanced radar systems and how they could improve US AEGIS radar systems. Understanding that most of the success and efficiency arguments have their root in the radar systems should make them a more important part of the debate. Teams argue THAAD doesn't work, but if you analyze why people conclude that it's ineffective, it seems that it's typically a flaw in the radar system, rather than a flaw in the actual missile defense capacity. This is where interoperability between countries can really strengthen your argument.

South Korean military modernization

Over the summer, there was so much talk about Kill Chain and whether or not this offensive military capability of South Korea was an affirmative or negative argument. However, if you continue the research into Moon's military policies, you will find that Moon is ramping up every aspect of the South Korean military. There have been South Korean delegates in Washington arguing for a return of tactical nuclear weapons, and Moon has even developed his own decapitation unit, known as Spartan 3000, to use on Kim Jong-un. Understanding that these requests are a part of a larger foreign policy decision can really help negative teams. If THAAD, AEGIS and Patriot are as unreliable as many experts say, South Korea truly doesn't feel assured by them. This lack of assurance may be feeding South Korea's drive to modernize their military even more. There are definitely arguments to be made about how a policy of deterrence that relies upon defensive measures may not provide the assurance that South Korea is looking for when they have nuclear weapons pointed at them just a couple hundred miles away.

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Jeffrey Miller is a two-diamond coach at Marist School in Atlanta, Georgia. He is the Director of Curriculum for the Public Forum divisions at the National Debate Forum.