

**International Agents of Action in Policy Debate: An Introduction to
Topic Selection in 2022-23**

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The Topic Selection Committee of the National Federation of High Schools has made the decision to entertain only those topic proposals in 2022-23 specifying an international actor as the agent of action. This action has been taken after consulting with representatives of the National Speech and Debate Association (NSDA), the National Catholic Forensic League (NCFL) and the National Debate Coaches Association (NDCA). Examples of international actors are the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the European Union, the International Criminal Court, the World Health Organization, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, or any national government (or potentially even non-government) actor outside of the United States.

What is the rationale for limiting agents of action in 2022-23 to international actors?

Participation in interscholastic policy debate builds valuable skills in the areas of evidence collection, building argument briefs and in oral argument. But, in addition, policy debate offers an in-depth look at major political, economic and social issues facing the nation and world. By the end of a debate season, policy debaters often have an understanding of complex issues that surpasses what could be gained by two semesters of college-level work on

equivalent subject matters. Intensive study of a single subject matter is one of the great advantages of interscholastic policy debate.

The National Federation of High Schools, through its Topic Selection Committee, has always had a goal of offering a mixture of domestic and foreign policy issues over the four years of a high school student's debating experience. Over the past decade, this been facilitated by the adoption of a formal four-year rotation: domestic topic, mixed domestic/international, international topic, mixed domestic/international. The problem with such a system is that it is often difficult to distinguish between domestic and international topics when the agent of action is always the "United States federal government," as it has been for the past forty-four years. Is cybersecurity an international or domestic topic? How about the topic of immigration or national defense? These (and many other) topics have both domestic and international implications. Yet if the actor is always the U.S. government, the domestic aspects of the topic often take priority. Accordingly, debaters miss out on the educational opportunity to see how the world looks from the perspective of Europe, Asia, Africa or Latin America.

The use of international actors has been successfully pre-tested.

The NSDA has had great success in specifying international actors for public forum topics worded as policy resolutions. Examples of resolutions with the "United Nations" as the agent of action were in April of 2019, "Resolved: The United Nations should grant India permanent membership on the Security Council," January of 2015, "Resolved: United Nations peacekeepers should have the power to engage in offensive operations" and October of 2009, "Resolved: When in conflict, the United Nations should prioritize global poverty reduction over environmental protection." Though this latter resolution is worded as a value resolution, it did

offer a debate on what actions ought to be taken by the United Nations in the areas of poverty reduction and environmental protection.

A recent (September/October 2019) NSDA public forum resolution offered the “European Union” as the agent of action: “Resolved: The European Union should join the Belt and Road Initiative.” The 2014 public forum topic at NSDA nationals used NATO as the agent of action: “Resolved: NATO should strengthen its relationship with Ukraine in order to deter further Russian aggression.”

Several NSDA public forum topics have used other national governments as their agent of action. The topic in January of 2018 used Spain: “Resolved: Spain should grant Catalonia its independence.” The September/October 2017 resolution asked debaters to look at a topic from the standpoint of South Korea: “Resolved: Deployment of anti-missile systems is in South Korea’s best interest.” The April, 2014 NSDA public forum topic asked what is best for India: “Resolved: Prioritizing economic development over environmental protection is in the best interest of the people of India.”

Past policy debate topics have used international actors.

The most recent use of an international actor in policy debate came in 1975-76: “Resolved: That the development and allocation of scarce world resources should be controlled by an international organization.” That was actually a topic proposal that I made and defended before the Topic Selection Committee. The resolution came at a time that the going wisdom among environmentalists was that Earth was running out of vital resources and that developed countries were exploiting their use at an overly rapid rate. The resolution allowed affirmative teams to choose an international agent who would be entrusted with managing scarce resources –

the United Nations, the World Bank or some newly created organization. By most accounts, debaters and coaches enjoyed the change in perspective offered by this topic.

Another experiment with an international actor in policy debate included the resolution in 1964-65, “Resolved: That nuclear weapons should be controlled by an international organization.” An even more open-ended international topic was chosen in 1942-43: “Resolved: That a federal world government should be established.” Exactly the same topic was debated again in 1948-49.

Why do some debate theorists fear the selection of a topic featuring an international agent of action?

The fear of allowing affirmative teams to “fiat” action by an international actor is grounded in concerns about utopian idealism. John Katsulas, Dale Herbeck and Edward Panetta wrote a widely cited article in the Fall 1987 journal, *Argumentation and Advocacy*, with the title, “Fiating Utopia: A Negative View of the Emergence of World Order Counterplans and Futures Gaming in Policy Debate” (Katsulas, Herbeck, & Panetta, 1987). Their argument was that “fiat theory should be restricted to assumptions grounded in real world policy making processes” (Katsulas et al., 1987, p. 95). The authors believed that policy debate would become unmanageable if students were allowed to make arguments about what “should be the case” without having to defend the feasibility or likelihood of their proposals. The advantages associated with “real world politics” always seem to pale when compared to the ideal worlds proposed by Princeton University scholar, Richard Falk, among others. Falk always responded to such criticism by arguing that we should not be so quick to limit our thinking to what seems feasible:

It should be pointed out that the impossible happens rather frequently. Recent instances include decolonization, the American civil rights movement, the liberation of Eastern Europe, the collapse of apartheid in South Africa, and the election of an African American as president of the United States. All of these outcomes were impossible in the sense that few, if any, 'responsible' persons envisioned such results as feasible, and scoffed at proponents. Of course, after the fact, these responsible observers had many explanations to account for the outcomes previously neglected or dismissed as impossible. (Falk, 2014, p. 11)

I responded to the claims of Katsulas, Herbeck and Panetta in the following issue of *Argumentation and Advocacy* as follows: "(1) The traditional conception of fiat does not include political feasibility, (2) The problem of field specialization does not prevent discussion of utopianism in a policy context, (3) Futurist writings such as those of Richard Falk are designed for policy relevance, and (4) Debate judges should not arbitrarily exclude from a debate the advocacy of alternative futures" (Edwards, 1987, p. 112). I argued that the academic literature provides an adequate check on the abusive use of alternative actors in that debaters would still be required to read solvency evidence establishing the workability of proposed solutions. Numerous other debate commentators have weighed in on the feasibility within the debate context of using agents of action other than the United States federal government (Antonucci, 2011; Katsulas et al., 1987; Madsen, 1993; McGee & Romanelli, 1997; Mitchell, 1992; Smith, 1998).

It should be noted, however, that most of the criticism of fiating the action of international or alternative actors is focused on currently non-existent (therefore utopian) policy actors. Richard Falk proposed the creation of a world government with powers far beyond those currently enjoyed by the United Nations. Defenders of a socialist world order write about an

idealistic framework that is fundamentally different from the current examples in Russia, China or Cuba. But the international agents of action envisioned in the call for 2022-23 debate topics bear no relationship to such controversies. Instead, the call anticipates resolutions focusing on what existing international actors ought to do. Those existing international actors could include national governments or existing international organizations.

What are the limits of fiat for international agents of action?

For those topic areas focused on what other national or regional governments should do – the European Union, Japan, Taiwan, etc. – no unusual questions arise. Debaters would simply be asked to take the standpoint of those national or regional governments and ask what policies ought to be adopted.

The questions arise for those international actors who currently have limited power of action. It might be a good idea, for example, for the United Nations Security Council to impose stronger economic sanctions on Iran. But in the present environment, stronger sanctions would be vetoed by China and/or Russia. Could the affirmative team “fiat” such sanctions? Finding an answer requires an exploration of the theoretical grounding of fiat power. This power grows out of the “should” term in the debate resolution. The affirmative team is simply saying that doing the affirmative action is a good thing – it should be done – regardless of whether it ever would be done.

Consider the analogy to a domestic political topic. Sometimes affirmative teams propose actions that would violate the U.S. Constitution – banning citizen possession or use of handguns, for example. We have always taken the position that the affirmative plan could be adopted by all necessary means, even if that requires an amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The key limiting

factor is that while the affirmative can ignore political realities in order to adopt the plan, it must live in the real political world once so adopted. In this case, the plan to ban handguns would create a massive political backlash. This backlash would become the grounding for disadvantage arguments.

Similarly, if the affirmative team fiats an action by the UN Security Council that ignores the likely veto of permanent members of the Security Council, a dangerous precedent would have been created. The action might make it impossible for the United States to use its veto to protect Israel from hostile Security Council actions. It might cause member nations to halt financial or other types of support for the United Nations.

The end result is that the use of affirmative fiat to expand the customary powers of international actors such as the United Nations, while possible, may not be desirable as an affirmative strategy. As the result of the unusual expansion of fiat, the affirmative team may lose more than it has gained because of the disadvantage ground it has now given to the negative. All such matters can be managed within the normal flow of debate argumentation.

What are the normal powers of international actors?

The wealth of debate arguments relating to international actors is well-demonstrated by organizations such as the National High School Model UN and the High School Arab League (Jones, 2019; National High School Model United Nations, 2019). While the power of action of groups such as the UN are limited by the willingness of state actors to support them, positive change is still possible even within such limitations. Former UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold wrote that “the purpose of the UN is not to get us to heaven but to save us from hell” (Weiss, 1994).

The United Nations has recently become more involved in the protection of civilian populations, using the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle. Carrie Walling, author of the 2013 book, *All Necessary Measures: The United Nations and Humanitarian Intervention*, pointed to the recent UN-sponsored intervention in Libya as a demonstration of this new resolve: “What the recent UNSC intervention in Libya shows is that when perpetrators are states, the fact of their sovereign authority will no longer automatically protect them from humanitarian intervention” (Walling, 2013, p. 268). Despite the ever-present concern about vetoes, the UN Security Council also has established economic sanctions against governments oppressing their own peoples or representing a threat to international peace and security (Biersteker, 2016; Einsiedel, 2016).

The various agencies of the United Nations have also taken an active role in the protection of the environment. Thomas G. Weiss, City University of New York's Graduate Center, offers the following comment in his 2010 book, *Global Governance and the UN: An Unfinished Journey*: The UN has been both a major actor in its own right in mainstreaming the environment in international policy discourse and a permanent forum for all major actors. The lead institutional actors are the IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change], the UNFCCC [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change], and UNEP [UN Environment Programme]. These institutions also carried the prime responsibilities for monitoring compliance” (Weiss, 2010, pp. 248–249).

United Nations Peacekeeping Operations are currently involved in 14 countries on 5 continents. Karen Mingst, professor of political science at the University of Kentucky, describes the scope of these operations in her 2011 book, *The United Nations in the Twenty-First Century*:

Peacekeepers can separate, disarm, and demobilize combatants; police ceasefires; and, in limited circumstances, even use more coercive measures under Chapter VII mandates to preserve international peace and security. They can protect aid workers, monitor human rights violations, undertake security sector reform, repatriate refugees, and provide interim civil administration. The idea has been implemented on every continent, using small to large contingents, some with pronounced effect and others deemed as mixed successes or even failures. Peacekeeping has become an integral part of the UN's approaches to addressing threats to peace and security, along with mediation, preventive diplomacy, and enforcement. (Mingst, 2011, p. 283)

The United Nations also tries to redress the global problems associated with poverty through its UN Development Programme. The activities of the UNDP were discussed by Francis Adams, professor of political science at Old Dominion University in his 2010 book, *The United Nations in Latin America: Aiding Development*:

As the world's largest source of multilateral grant assistance, UNDP is sometimes considered the development agency of the South. UNDP, which was established in 1965 through the merger of the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance (EPTA) and the United Nations Special Fund (UNSF), sponsors programs and projects throughout the developing world. Its central objective is to build national capacity for poverty reduction and sustainable development. (Adams, 2010, p. 12)

Adams also discusses the scope of the UN-sponsored World Food Programme: “The World Food Programme is the largest provider of international food assistance. Its central purpose is to extend food aid to countries whose populations suffer from acute or chronic hunger.

WFP offers humanitarian relief to meet the short-term needs of people displaced by civil conflict or natural disaster and works to promote long-term nutritional security” (Adams, 2010, p. 15).

The effort to limit the ravages of disease throughout the world are organized by the World Health Organization. Kenneth Abbott, professor of law at Arizona State University explains the function of the WHO in the 2015 book, *International Organizations as Orchestrators*:

WHO has always been active in disease surveillance and response. In cases of acute outbreaks, WHO traditionally acts as the central "facilitator and coordinator" of response measures in which local and regional WHO staff provide technical advice, other IGOs such as UNICEF and NGOs such as Doctors Without Borders provide material assistance, and WHO Collaborating Centers contribute information about an outbreak, its causative agent, and effective counter-measures. (Abbott, 2015, p. 205)

The World Bank, while affiliated with the United Nations, operates independently. The UN Department of Public Information describes the operation of the World Bank in the 2011 book, *Basic Facts About the United Nations*:

The term "World Bank" itself refers specifically to two of the five institutions [of the World Bank Group]: the BRD [International Bank for Reconstruction and Development] and the IDA [International Development Association]. The goal of the Bank is to reduce poverty around the world by strengthening the economies of poor nations, and improving people's living standards by promoting economic growth and development. (UN Department of Public Information., 2011, p. 45)

Other UN-affiliated organizations, such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC), could become the focus of topic areas dealing with international legal remedies for violations of human rights (Cassese, 2012).

International organizations outside of the United Nations also offer opportunity for debate. Lawrence Kaplan, professor of government at Georgetown University, writing in his 2010 book, *NATO and the UN: A Peculiar Relationship*, wonders about the future of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization: “The torrent of negative commentary on the alliance, as NATO was riven with dissent over Iraq and bogged down in Afghanistan since 2004, has raised the prospect of a marginalized organization, dissolving through irrelevance if not through disintegration” (Kaplan, 2010, p. 215).

The World Trade Organization (WTO) is involved in the management of trade disputes between nations. This role was discussed by Rob Vos in the 2013 book, *Retooling Global Development and Governance*: “The World Trade Organization system has a dispute resolution process which constitutes the only effective international economic enforcement mechanism. This has stimulated the expansion of the World Trade Organization's purview to include the so-called trade-related areas, namely, investment, property rights and services” (Vos, 2013, p. 12).

The foregoing paragraphs only offer a small sampling of the international organizations now in operation. According to the 2001 book, *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction To International Relations*, there are more than 250 intergovernmental organizations active in international politics (Baylis, 2001, p. 357).

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