Strategy or Morality?  
Wording of the Resolution by Micah Chapman



I love chess. The task of strategically and meticulously defeating every piece my opponent has is a fantastic mental challenge, especially with an equally-matched opponent. In chess, you often have to go out on a limb and guess what the opponent’s strategy is in order to effectively prevent your opponent’s strategy (or what you *think* is your opponent’s strategy). This means removing certain enemy pieces that pose a serious threat to your own success; this task requires properly examining your options and making the best move you can. Even if a certain piece has not harmed you, a preemptive action is often necessary to prevent this harm from coming to pass.

This is analogous in many ways to warfare: world leaders have to be meticulous about the actions they take and the strategic consequences of said actions. Unfortunately, warfare is not a game. In the real world, these military missions have real consequences and are subject to morality. If you make a wrong move in chess, you can always try again next time. If you make a wrong move in war, innocent people could die.

That is the question this resolution gives us: What military actions are justified? In order to fully understand this resolution, we need to break the wording down, piece by piece, and study the implications of that wording in a debate round.

# “Preemptive Warfare”

To preempt something is to go before it. When an action is “preemptive,” it attempts to thwart a possible future action before it occurs. The same is true with warfare. A preemptive attack is usually based off of evidence that suggests the enemy will/may attack first. Initiating the first blow is often extremely beneficial in warfare. If you can destabilize your enemy’s capabilities, you can prevent an attack altogether. For example: if America receives intelligence informing them that North Korea is planning to nuke them, America could attack the nuclear launchpad, taking away North Korea’s nuclear capabilities, and preventing an attack altogether. That is preemptive warfare.

Although the idea of preemptive warfare seems simple at first glance, it is often difficult for a country to *know*, with absolute certainty, that a threat exists from another country. Because of this, there are two primary ways you could run the specifics of this definition.

## 1. Preempting an Incoming Threat

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/preemptive+attack>   
This definition embraces a perfectionist interpretation of this resolution. It states that an attack is only “preemptive” if it strikes another country based on evidence that an attack is imminent. This definition is more idealistic; stating that there has to be an actual threat (not just the appearance of one) for this to classify as preemptive warfare. This interpretation would benefit the affirmative in this resolution, because the negative would be unable to use examples of preemptive warfare that were based on faulty intelligence. As negative, it may be beneficial to use examples where a country preemptively struck another country, even though no attack had been planned. If this definition is used, it may be difficult to find effective negative arguments. There are plenty of negative strategies that can use this definition without being hindered.

## 2. Preempting a Possible Threat

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/preemptive> [[1]](#footnote-1)   
This definition is the simpler, and more realistic, of the two. It defines preemptive as “taken as a measure against something possible, anticipated, or feared.” According to this definition, even if a country makes a mistake and attacks a country where no real threat exists, that still classifies as preemptive warfare. This definition would open the door to many more examples (because of the room for error), and makes the aff side much more difficult to defend.

So, to recap, the first definition is what preemptive warfare should be, whereas the second definition is what preemptive warfare often is in the real world. Whichever definition you chose, it seems that a definitions debate may be inevitable. Affirmatives will most likely choose the definition that benefits them, and negatives will do the same. It may be necessary for some debaters to bite the bullet and accept the tougher definition for their side. A difficult debate is considerably more educational and interesting than a definitions debate. Either way, this resolution sets up an interesting conflict.

# “Is”

Lincoln-Douglas debates usually revolve around what *ought* to happen, not what *is* happening. But saying that preemptive warfare “ought to be” morally justified makes little sense. That would mean there is no inherent morality in the world around us. Because of absolute morality, every action is already morally justified or unjustified.

Also, just because the word “is” is in this resolution does not mean that the affirmative has to prove that preemptive warfare is *always* morally justified. It is safe to assume that this resolution means that — if a situation calls for it — preemptive warfare is morally justified. So do not be put off by the word “is.” All it does is place the burden on the affirmative to prove a moral justification exists for preemptive warfare.

# “Morally Justified”

In order for something to be “morally justified,” there has to be some way to morally justify it. How can we morally justify something? There are two main ways to morally justify a military action:

## 1. Just War Theory

Over the years, many philosophers have asked the question, “when is a war morally justified?” It has culminated into what is commonly known as Just War Theory. The most famous philosopher on this subject is Thomas Aquinas. In his theory, *Jus Ad Bellum*, he outlines six specific criteria that justify a state going to war:

“1. War must be in a just cause. There is disagreement over what constitutes a just cause. Examples offered are self-defence, the defence of others from aggressive attack, the protection of innocent people from aggressive regimes, or corrective punishment for aggression past action. All involve the ‘resistance of aggression’, the violation of basic rights by use of armed force.   
2. The right intention for fighting the war is because it is in a just cause. Any other intention, e.g. material gain, undermines the justice of the war.   
3. The decision to go to war must be made with the proper authority (usually laid down in the state’s constitution) and by a public declaration.   
4. The declaration of war must be a last resort, following the exhaustion of all plausible alternatives means to resolving the conflict.   
5. A declaration of war can only be just if the state can foresee a probability of success in resolving the conflict through war. Violence without likely gain cannot be justified.   
6. The response of declaring war must be proportionate, i.e. the good that can be secured through war must outweigh the evil that will most likely occur. The end must justify the means. And in this calculation, the state must take into account not just the costs and benefits to itself, but those that will affect everyone involved in the war (e.g. including enemy casualties).”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Although that is a long definition, it is also extremely effective. If you edit this down and take the time to explain it in the round, you can impact every example back to these six criteria, making a moral justification easy to understand and quantify.

## 2. Government’s Moral Obligation

The second way to define “morally justified” is to focus on the purpose of a government. A government action is justified if it aligns with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. You could easily focus on this definition, and it would have a realistic impact on the way governments make their decisions. If a war aligns with those three criteria, it can be considered morally justified. Focus on how the government has a moral obligation to protect and provide for its citizens.

So there you have it! This year promises to to be interesting, so long as we don’t get too caught up in definitions debates. I would encourage you to think long and hard about the implications of the wording of this resolution, and use the definitions that work best for you (and are fair).

Good luck, and I hope to see you at NITOC this year!

1. See definition #2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Routledge, <http://bit.ly/2sDRElN> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)