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***THE DYNAMICS OF THE NORTHERN  
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## **The Dynamics of the Northern Ireland Conflict**

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***Abstract.*** After briefly recounting the centuries-old dispute between Great Britain and Ireland, the current conflict over Northern Ireland between Britain and Sinn Féin/Irish Republican Army (IRA) is analyzed as a 2 x 2 game. The unique Nash equilibrium in this game is shown not to predict the recent behavior of Sinn Féin/IRA, which, after declaring a cease-fire in September 1994, resumed its bombing campaign in February 1996. However, these moves are consistent with Sinn Féin/IRA's asserting its threat power, according to the theory of moves, after negotiations with Britain failed to materialize. The mutually beneficial resolution to this conflict seems to lie in the farsighted strategic calculations of leaders who, recognizing that a reversion to conflict is likely to occur if conciliatory behavior is not reciprocated, reward such behavior even if it proves temporarily costly.

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# **The Dynamics of the Northern Ireland Conflict**

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## **1. Introduction**

On February 9, 1996, after a seventeen-month cease-fire, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) set off a bomb in East London. Less than a week later, the London police found and destroyed a bomb that the IRA had left in a telephone booth in the West End. A few days later, another IRA bomb went off on a double-decker bus. The British government asserted that it would have no official contact with Sinn Féin, the political arm of the IRA, until the paramilitary activities stopped. The government also deployed 500 additional troops in Northern Ireland.

These are just the most recent developments in a seemingly intractable conflict over British rule in Northern Ireland. The conflict between the British government and the IRA is part of a larger struggle between nationalists, such as Sinn Féin and the IRA, who demand that Northern Ireland become part of an all-Ireland nation-state, and unionists, including the present British government, who insist that Northern Ireland remain part of the United Kingdom. While the British government has tried to portray itself at times as a neutral party, it seems more accurate to view it as a pro-union force. Indeed, Prime Minister John Major himself, speaking about his Conservative party, asserted, "We are a Unionist Party. We should fight for the Union."<sup>1</sup>

The recent renewal of armed conflict brings to the fore life-and-death questions posed by the so-called "troubles" in Northern Ireland: Is there any possibility for compromise and an enduring peace? If so, how can the two sides help to expedite a durable settlement? Why

have their moves failed so far? And finally, why would nationalist forces threaten to derail the peace process by resuming paramilitary actions?

In this article, we address these questions by examining the strategic situation in which the IRA and the British government find themselves. By utilizing a dynamic approach to game theory called the "theory of moves,"<sup>2</sup> we demonstrate both why the IRA resumed its paramilitary actions and how such future disruptions in the peace process might be prevented by farsighted leaders.

## **2. A Centuries-Old Conflict**

The present conflict must be seen in the context of the centuries-old Anglo-Irish antagonism. Nationalists point to the first Norman invasions of Ireland in 1169 as the start of the conflict, while unionists focus on the arrival of Scottish and English settlers, beginning in 1609. The arrival of these settlers in the north, often called the "plantation of Ulster," is the source of Northern Ireland's Protestant, and mostly unionist, majority.

Irish republicans have continually fought against British rule, most fiercely at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The war of independence, from 1919 to 1921, led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, negotiated by the British government and Sinn Féin. The treaty granted independence to the 26 southern counties of Ireland, which became the Republic of Ireland, and it gave Great Britain control over Northern Ireland. But assurances the treaty offered Sinn Féin that the dispute over Northern Ireland would be resolved came to naught.

After 1921, Northern Ireland remained under British control, although the Stormont regime set up by the British did enjoy a certain level of autonomy. Until the late 1960s, the

armed nationalist movement in Northern Ireland met with little support or success.<sup>3</sup> Then, in the late 1960s, Catholics in Northern Ireland began a series of civil rights marches to protest, among other things, discrimination in voting, employment, and housing. The marchers appealed to the British government to protect their rights as British citizens,<sup>4</sup> but they were attacked by unionist extremists, including some in the security forces. Thereafter, violence spread rapidly.

In 1969, the British government sent troops to Northern Ireland in an attempt to quell the unrest. Although Britain desired to maintain the quasi-independence of Northern Ireland, the conflict spiraled out of control, and in 1972 the Stormont regime was suspended and replaced by direct rule from London. Attempts by the British government to control the violence during the 1970s and 1980s failed miserably. Between 1969 and 1990 there were nearly 3,000 political deaths in Northern Ireland.

### **3. The Conflict from a Strategic Perspective**

By 1994, Northern Ireland had experienced a quarter-century of widespread sectarian violence. In the following analysis, we present a game-theoretic view of the conflict between Sinn Féin/IRA, treated as one player, and the British government in the 1990s. There are, to be sure, other important actors in the conflict, such as the Republic of Ireland, unionists in Northern Ireland, and nationalists who are not associated with Sinn Féin/IRA. However, by focusing on the struggle between the British government and Sinn Féin/IRA, we highlight the central conflict, whose dynamics we will focus on in the next section.

We consider two basic strategic stances the two sides can take. One is a hard-line stance, denoted by H. For Great Britain, this entails a refusal to negotiate with Sinn

Féin/IRA, as well as the maintenance of British rule by force. For Sinn Féin/IRA, it means a refusal to accept any resolution short of complete independence, taking whatever paramilitary actions are necessary to fight British rule.

Each side, as an alternative strategy, can take a conciliatory stance, denoted by C. For Great Britain, such a stance would mean a willingness to negotiate a compromise solution to the conflict, including a demilitarization of its position. For Sinn Féin/IRA, C would indicate a similar willingness to compromise, including a halt to its paramilitary activities, at least temporarily.

The choice of C or H by each side leads to four possible outcomes, or states, that can be summarized as follows:

1. **C - C.** Compromise, resulting in a peaceful settlement.
2. **H - H.** Violent conflict, resulting in the continuation of the "troubles."
3. **H (Sinn Féin/IRA) - C (Great Britain).** Capitulation by Great Britain, which unilaterally withdraws its forces.
4. **C (Sinn Féin/IRA) - H (Great Britain).** Capitulation by Sinn Féin/IRA, which unilaterally stops its armed resistance.

We next rank these four states for both sides as follows: 4 = best; 3 = next best; 2 = next worst; 1 = worst. Thus, the higher the number, the greater the payoff to a player. These numbers, however, do not signify any numerical value or utility a player attaches to a state. Rather, they indicate only that a higher-ranked state is preferred to a lower-ranked state.

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Figure 1 about here

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In the Figure 1 payoff matrix, these ranks are given by the ordered pair  $(x,y)$ , where  $x$  is the ranking of the row player (Sinn Féin/IRA) and  $y$  is the ranking of the column player (Great Britain). We offer the following brief justification of these rankings for each actor, starting with the upper-left state and moving clockwise around the matrix:

**1. Compromise: (3,3).** This is the next-best state for both players, involving a compromise on the issue of sovereignty.<sup>5</sup> For both Great Britain and Sinn Féin/IRA, the benefits of this state include an end to the violence and the possibility of long-term peace in Northern Ireland.

**2. IRA Capitulates: (2,4).** This is the best state for Great Britain because it has all the benefits of a compromise without having to make any concessions. It is the next-worst state for Sinn Féin/IRA because, while life in Northern Ireland achieves some level of normalcy, British rule remains in place.

**3. Violent Conflict: (1,2).** This is the next-worst state for Great Britain because, although it maintains control over Northern Ireland, paramilitary attacks continue; in addition, Britain faces pressure from the Republic of Ireland, the United States, and the European Union to bring an end to the violence. It is the worst state for Sinn Féin/IRA, because both British rule and the violence continue.

**4. Britain Capitulates: (4,1).** This is the worst state for Great Britain, which loses all control over Northern Ireland by withdrawing its forces; Britain is also seen as "caving in"

to terrorism. By contrast, Sinn Féin/IRA achieves its best state by gaining independence, without the need to compromise its hard-line position.

The ostensible solution to this game is the (3,3) compromise, but this is not the solution that game theory prescribes. The reason is that Great Britain has a *dominant strategy* of H: it is a better strategy than C whatever strategy Sinn Féin/IRA chooses. Thus, if Sinn Féin/IRA chooses C, then (2,4) is better for Britain than (3,3); if Sinn Féin/IRA chooses H, (1,2) is better for Britain than (4,1).

Presuming that Britain chooses H because it is unconditionally better than C, what will Sinn Féin/IRA do? Observe that Sinn Féin/IRA does not have a dominant strategy: H is better if Britain chooses C, giving (4,1) rather than (3,3), but C is better if Britain chooses H, giving (2,4) rather than (1,2).

We assume, in a game of complete information, that Sinn Féin/IRA can anticipate Britain will choose H. Accordingly, its best response would be to choose C, obtaining its next-worst state of (2,4) rather than its worst state of (1,2).

The strategies that yield (2,4) are what game theorists call a *Nash equilibrium*, because if either player departed unilaterally from its strategy associated with this state (C for Sinn Féin/IRA, H for Britain), it would do worse. By contrast, if the players both chose C, leading to compromise, each would have an incentive to depart from C to try to achieve its best state -- (2,4) for Great Britain and (4,1) for Sinn Féin/IRA. The states of (4,1) and (1,2) are also unstable in the sense that at least one player would have an incentive unilaterally to change its strategy. Hence, (2,4) is the unique stable state in this game.

The dominance of H for Great Britain helps to explain Britain's refusal to negotiate with Sinn Féin, even after the 1994-1996 cease-fire. However, the actions of the IRA -- starting paramilitary activities, suspending them, resuming them -- belie the supposed stability of (2,4). At least within the confines of classical game theory, the use of force by the IRA would seem to be irrational. In order to account for the changes in strategy by Sinn Féin and the IRA, we next turn to the theory of moves, which allows for strategy shifts by players as they attempt to implement desired outcomes.

#### 4. TOM and Threats

Game theory, as developed initially by von Neumann and Morgenstern, is an approach that is, in their own words, "thoroughly static."<sup>6</sup> Classical game theory has little to say about the dynamic process by which players' choices unfold to produce outcomes. By contrast, the theory of moves, abbreviated here as TOM, adds a dynamic dimension by assuming that players look ahead before making a move, switching strategies in anticipation of the possible countermoves of an opponent.

A key concept of TOM, and one which is very helpful in analyzing the conflict in Northern Ireland, is the notion of "threat power." A player has *threat power* when it can better endure an inefficient state than can an opponent. An *inefficient state* is one that is worse for both players than some other state. Thus in the Figure 1 game, (1,2) is an inefficient state because it is worse for both players than either (2,4) or (3,3).

Consider the situation in Northern Ireland, as depicted in Figure 1, and how the two sides have attempted to assert their threat power. For the preponderance of the post-1970 conflict, the IRA has used its paramilitary forces to try to establish its threat power by

signaling its willingness to endure the mutually harmful (i.e., inefficient) state of (1,2).

Observe that by choosing H, Sinn Féin/IRA ensures that Great Britain is faced with its two worst states, (4,1) and (1,2).

By asserting its threat power, Sinn Féin/IRA took a hard-line stance -- but *not* because it preferred the conflict at (1,2) to capitulation at (2,4). Instead, it hoped to force the British to take a conciliatory stance. As Gerry Adams, the president of Sinn Féin, put it, "The course I take involves the use of physical force[;] but only if I achieve the situation where my people prosper can my course of action be seen, by me, to have been justified."<sup>7</sup>

Recall that Great Britain has a dominant strategy of maintaining its own hard-line position (H), which is better for it whatever Sinn Féin/IRA does. But when Great Britain implements its dominant strategy at the same time that Sinn Féin/IRA threatens Britain's two worst states with its choice of H, the result is violent conflict. This state held throughout most of the 1970s and 1980s.

One way out of this situation is for both sides to agree to move to the mutually beneficial compromise state. In the 1990s, there were talks to try to arrive at such a settlement. The British position was that the IRA would have to renounce its use of paramilitary activities before formal negotiations for a resolution of the Northern Ireland conflict could begin. In essence, Great Britain was insisting that Sinn Féin/IRA move from H to C first, shifting the game from (1,2) to (2,4).

On the other hand, if Great Britain moved first to C, the situation would shift from (1,2) to (4,1), at least momentarily. Then Sinn Féin/IRA could move to C, resulting in the (3,3) compromise state. But this sequence of moves could be interpreted as Great Britain's

having given in to terrorism at (4,1), which was unacceptable to the British government and also entailed the risk that Sinn Féin/IRA would not subsequently move onto (3,3). Hence, Britain insisted that Sinn Féin/IRA make the first conciliatory move.

Sinn Féin/IRA agreed to these conditions in September of 1994 by declaring a "total cease-fire." This can be seen as a move by Sinn Féin/IRA from (1,2) to (2,4), which is better for both players, yielding an efficient if lopsided state (i.e., the state most favorable to Britain). In return, Sinn Féin/IRA hoped that Britain would also switch strategies to a conciliatory stance by entering negotiations with them to resolve the conflict, leading to a final settlement.

After the Sinn Féin/IRA halted its paramilitary activities, and the situation stood at (2,4), Great Britain was not responsive: it did not enter negotiations with Sinn Féin, nor did it make any other significant concessions. While (2,4) is Great Britain's best outcome, from which it would have no motivation to move, Sinn Féin/IRA still possessed the threat power to move back to (1,2). In short, the threat was that if the British government did not move to a conciliatory stance, leading to (3,3), the IRA would return to a hard-line stance, reinstating the inefficient state of (1,2).

Great Britain, under the leadership of John Major, was not willing to open negotiations with Sinn Féin unless the IRA first surrendered its weapons. Thus, the situation stood at (2,4) after the IRA declared a cease-fire. The British, by demanding that the IRA go one step further and disarm itself, sought to eliminate its adversary's threat power -- that is, its power to revert to H and, once again, threaten Britain's two worst outcomes.

By refusing to move subsequently to (3,3) by entering negotiations with Sinn Féin, Great Britain may have passed up an important opportunity to achieve a lasting peace. After the cease-fire, as the expression goes, the ball was in Britain's court. Yet Britain did little. The Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland, John Bruton, claimed that "Britain had shown less courage, generosity and decisiveness since the paramilitary ceasefires last year than had many people in Ireland."<sup>8</sup> To most observers, Bruton seemed to be saying that Major had not been able to reciprocate the bold action taken by Gerry Adams in declaring and sustaining a cease-fire.

The IRA refused to disarm, prior to any settlement, for a very good reason: disarming would deprive it of the only leverage it had -- to return to H if Great Britain itself did not budge from H. Without the presence of a threat, Great Britain would have had no incentive to move away from its best state of (2,4).

An international commission, chaired by former United States Senator George Mitchell, implicitly recognized this dynamic by recommending that all-party negotiations be conducted before the "decommissioning" of paramilitary arms. But Major rejected this suggestion and refused to enter ministerial-level talks with Sinn Féin.

In terms of our analysis, Great Britain was unwilling to move from (2,4) to (3,3). While Britain's stay-put strategy is rational in the short run because it enjoys its best state at (2,4), it is irrational if Sinn Féin/IRA is capable of reverting to (1,2), as proved to be the case. And, as Kevin Toolis argues, the IRA did not restart their bombing campaign "on a whim."<sup>9</sup> They believed, instead, that the British government betrayed promises made in secret negotiations between 1990 and 1993.

It was, unquestionably, Major's decision not to negotiate that persuaded Sinn Féin/IRA leaders to resort to violent actions in February 1996.<sup>10</sup> Thus, after a cease-fire which lasted nearly a year and a half, the IRA resumed its paramilitary activities by commencing a bombing campaign in London, and the situation returned to the destructive (1,2) state.

## 5. Conclusion

It is always difficult for adversaries to move from hard-line positions to conciliatory ones. When, after years of struggle, leaders of two hostile groups are able to find the will and the trust to make such moves, an historic peace can be achieved. Such seems to have been the case in South Africa, where de Klerk and Mandela found a path to peace. A similar reconciliation seems to have occurred in the Middle East, where Arafat, Rabin, and Peres were able to lead the State of Israel and the PLO to a settlement.

In both these cases, the use of threats by the ANC and the PLO were decisive in to pushing the process toward a compromise. Moreover, the leaders of the South African and Israeli governments were farsighted enough to see that there was a way out of a seemingly intractable situation.

Perhaps we should call the game we have explicated the "Nobel Peace Prize Game," because Mandela, de Klerk, Arafat, Rabin, and Peres all were given that award for the courage, generosity, and decisiveness they had shown. If the situation in Northern Ireland is indeed analogous to the Middle East and South Africa, John Major might have missed an historic opportunity during the cease-fire to forge a peaceful settlement out of the conflict in Northern Ireland. But perhaps it is not too late for him -- or future leaders.

Figure 1

Payoff Matrix of the Northern Ireland Conflict

		Great Britain	
		C	H
Sinn Féin/ IRA	C	Compromise (3, 3)	Capitulation by Sinn Féin/IRA ( <u>2</u> , 4)
	H	Capitulation by Great Britain (4, 1)	Violent Conflict (1, 2)

↑  
Dominant  
Strategy

Key: C = conciliatory stance

H = hard-line stance

(x,y) = (payoff to Sinn Féin/IRA, payoff to Great Britain)

4 = best; 3 = next best; 2 = next worst; 1 = worst

Nash equilibrium underscored

## Notes

1. Arthur Aughey (1994), "Conservative Party Policy and Northern Ireland," in Brian Barton and Patrick J. Roche (eds.), *The Northern Ireland Question: Perspectives and Policies* (Aldershot, UK: Avebury), p. 143.
2. Steven J. Brams (1994), *Theory of Moves* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press).
3. Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry (1993), *The Politics of Antagonism* (London: Athlone Press), p. 161.
4. Richard Rose (1971), *Governing without Consensus: An Irish Perspective* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press), p. 156.
5. Various compromises that have been proposed include partitioning Northern Ireland between Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland and rule by a joint Anglo-Irish authority.
6. John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern (1953), *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 44.
7. Liam Clark (1994), "Contemporary Republican Politics," in Brian Barton and Patrick J. Roche (eds.), *The Northern Ireland Question: Perspectives and Policies* (Aldershot, UK: Avebury), p. 79.
8. "Northern Ireland's Peace Process: The Nitty Gritty," *The Economist*, November 18, 1995, p. 62.
9. Kevin Toolis, "Why the I.R.A. Stopped Talking," *New York Times*, February 21, 1996, p. A19.
10. Jack Holland, "October Surprise!" *Irish Echo*, February 21-27, 1996, pp. 1, 39.