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The Good Friday Agreement

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The Belfast Peace Agreement, or Good Friday Agreement of 1998, is generally considered to have stopped the armed conflict in Northern Ireland. Based on conflict resolution literature, this paper analyzes the treaty's strengths and weaknesses, assessing its reputation as the document which brought peace to a decades-old conflict.

The Good Friday Agreement

The key to peace in Northern Ireland?

Iulian Mihalache

The conflict in Northern Ireland is strongly rooted in history. Ever since the UK agreed to an Ireland that could rule itself in the 1910s, Protestants (descendants of colonists), forming the majority in some northern areas, decided to fight against this decision and stay in the UK. Nationalist Catholics resisted them, and so the incompatibility was created. In time, southern Ireland managed to become autonomous and then independent, while the north, plagued by conflict between Protestant unionists and Catholic republicans, continued to be part of the UK, with Catholics suffering discrimination by Protestant locals and the government. The situation escalated from 1968 onwards with the so-called 'Troubles', pitting the British government and unionist militias against the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and its splinter groups, which resorted to acts of terrorism and asymmetric warfare throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The 1990s saw a de-escalation of the conflict as peace attempts multiplied, culminating in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA).¹

Provisions of the agreement

The treaty itself is a comprehensive, multi-level, multi-party attempt at creating a peaceful future for Northern Ireland. It comprised an internal agreement between the main political parties in the country, including Sinn Féin (the IRA's political arm) and an international agreement between the states with a stake in the conflict, the UK and Ireland. The treaty stated that, even though the views of both unionists and nationalists are legitimate ("a substantial section of the people in Northern Ireland share the

legitimate wish ... for a united Ireland"),² the status of the country could only be changed if a majority of the population desired so. The UK and Ireland pledged to accept popular choice, and people were free to declare themselves British or Irish or both, and hold both citizenships. This part was mostly designed to please the unionists, who were the majority in the country.

An essential part of the agreement was the creation of new institutions that would ensure political representation for both sides, thus granting Northern Ireland a devolved status within the UK and ensuring that Cath-

“People were free to declare themselves British or Irish or both, and hold both citizenships.”

olics have a greater say. According to 'Strand One' of the treaty, both legislative (Northern Ireland Assembly) and executive (Northern Ireland Executive) institutions were to be created, and to a large extent they were designed for power-sharing: the Assembly required a majority of both unionists and nationalists for key legislation to pass and ministerial portfolios in the Executive were allocated to each side. 'Strand Two' was meant to facilitate relations between the north and south by creating institutions bringing together the executives, parliaments and civil societies in Northern Ireland and Ireland, in order to develop consul-

tation, cooperation and coordination of policies. 'Strand Three' dealt with relationships between the islands of Ireland and Britain, again by bringing together politicians in order to seek cooperation and put forward policies beneficial to both islands.

The three strands were interlocking and interdependent, and the mandates of each new institution were broadly described. This part of the agreement was mostly meant to please the nationalists, who were guaranteed political representation through power-sharing mechanisms, but provisions towards north-south and east-west cooperation prove that the treaty envisioned a durable peace by ensuring cooperation not just between warring parties but also sponsor states.

After covering safeguards for human rights and equality of opportunity, the treaty addressed the troublesome issue of decommissioning weapons held by paramilitary groups. This process was to be monitored by a small international team of observers. In order to normalise security arrangements in Northern Ireland, the UK pledged to reduce its military presence and reform its police forces and criminal justice system. The UK and Ireland also agreed to the release of prisoners charged with terrorist acts in order to please their client organisations.

To prove that the peace process respected the wishes of the population, the signatories tied the ratification of the treaty to referendums in Northern Ireland and Ireland. 71 per cent in Northern Ireland and 94 per cent in Ireland voted in favour of the treaty a few months later, so the agreement was ratified.³

Strengths of the agreement ...

The agreement is generally considered to have stopped the armed conflict in Northern Ireland, as mass violence has not erupted since. If so, one must inquire into what made it successful. This article argues that the comprehensive agreement facilitated long-term peace because it combined power-sharing provisions with the inclusion of civil society and the population at large in the peace process.

Both power-sharing and inclusion have widely been covered in the theoretical literature. The reasoning behind power-sharing is simple: sides will not commit to peace if they have no guarantee that they can transform their military power into political power after the conflict (Walter, 2002). Proponents claim power-sharing forces former enemies to engage in political dialogue and take consensus decisions. Critics, however, show that power-sharing is not democratic, may cause political deadlock and entrench identities, thus

preventing durable peace (Sisk, 2006). While power-sharing ensures cooperation at the elite level, inclusion is meant to ensure that regular citizens participate in peacebuilding by trying to reach out, collaborate with the 'others' and rid themselves of the 'sticky' identities that ethnic war assigned them. Theoretically, the power-sharing and inclusion approaches are contradictory: the former assumes regular people are bigots and is suspicious of democracy, while the latter is democratic and assumes elites are incompetent (Dixon, 1997).

Throughout the years, both approaches have been used in attempting to solve the conflict, helping to shape a discourse for peace and legitimising the GFA. The British have been trying to implement power-sharing since 1972, with the help of Ireland since 1985, as the only solution through which sides would agree to peace. Cross-community NGOs have been active since the late 1960s, and the UK has been offering a framework for

civil society to promote reconciliation since 1990 (Byrne, 2001). Large peace rallies could also have contributed to a peaceful settlement, even though some claim they were smaller than communal solidarity rallies and were induced by war-weariness rather than a wish for reconciliation (Gilligan, 2003). Nonetheless, the argument is that power-sharing and inclusion are complementary and must both be applied (Byrne, 2001), something the GFA provides for.

This article argues that power-sharing was essential in reaching an agreement and represents the main pillar of the treaty. It gives combatants an incentive for peace by offering them a stake in the future political system of the country. Apart from elite cooperation, popular support is critical for any peace process, and, if it is not present, attempts must be made to construct it, by pushing for civil society peace activism and the education of the masses towards a better understanding of the situation. The fact that



PHOTO: PAUL FAITH/SCANPIX

Roisin Gallagher, aged nine, waits at army lines to be escorted to Holy Cross School in Ardoyne, north Belfast, in September 2001. Police and army formed a safe corridor with vehicles and surrounded the children from loyalists as they attended their second day at school. The governors of Holy Cross School urged parents to take their children by an alternative route after a Protestant mob attempted to prevent them from taking their children through a loyalist area the day before.

ratification was tied to referendums is an important strength of the treaty, as it acknowledges peace as the choice of the majority and de-legitimises actors wishing to continue hostilities. Thus, the GFA provides for political cooperation between former warring factions in the short term, while hoping for the construction of a peace-loving, cooperative civil society able to look beyond ethnic differences and take over the political process in the long run.

... and its weaknesses

Peace generally fails while implementing peace treaties, not during the negotiation or agreement phases. This is because actors have problems committing to the agreement's provisions due to security fears: during implementation, as they disarm and demobilise, they are extremely vulnerable and uncertain of the opponent's intentions. The opponent could easily cheat and launch a surprise attack, so treaties are implemented only if there are credible commitments against defection from the agreement. The commitment problem arises when actors find themselves without a third party guaranteeing the agreement and their security. This explains why only half the treaties ending civil wars between 1940 and 1992 were implemented (Walter, 2002).

Peace generally fails while implementing peace treaties, not during the negotiation or agreement phases.

Despite its extensive scope, the GFA failed to alleviate the commitment problem and ensure the parties' security. The decommissioning, police reform and normalisation of security provisions of the treaty were given little consideration compared to the political provisions and were too brief and vague to serve as credible commitments. While this may have helped towards signing and ratifying the agreement, postponing these essential issues proved problematic for the security of implementing actors.

Hence, this article argues that the main problem of the GFA is its lack of

third-party security guarantees. The small monitoring mission meant to oversee disarmament lacked a clear mandate and could not be seen as a credible guarantee. A more complex, multidimensional third-party mission would have been needed, even though, considering the UK's status as a world power, such a mission would have been utopian. Scholars have shown how peacekeeping prevents the re-emergence of hostilities. Among others, peacekeeping increases the costs of returning to war (by deterring parties), reduces uncertainty and fear through monitoring, facilitates communication, prevents escalation following undesired incidents, and prevents political abuse by supervising security sectors and running elections (Fortna, 2008). Such a peacekeeping operation by the UN would have appeared legitimate to the actors, particularly the nationalists, who had to rely on UK benevolence for implementation. It could have brought the benefits described above, solved the commitment problem and facilitated a faster transition to durable peace.

Aftermath of the treaty

The treaty's aftermath proves that there were important flaws in the GFA, as the lack of third-party security guarantees was indeed damaging to the peace process. Negotiations on disarmament continued but reached no agreement, affecting the political provisions of the GFA. The Northern Ireland Assembly was working on and off due to unionists' complaints that the IRA was not disarming. Meanwhile, the IRA was claiming that the UK had failed to implement its side of the bargain, particularly on police reform and army withdrawal. In 2002, in the context of a sluggish disarmament progress, the UK suspended the GFA institutions and introduced home rule. Disarmament efforts by the IRA were intensified in 2005, so the institutions were restored in 2007 and peace has been maintained so far.⁴

Hence, even though the agreement addressed the incompatibility between the parties, it did not address the commitment problem. Due to this, this article argues that war-weariness on behalf of both elites and population, and perhaps the IRA's belief that the UK would ensure its safety after disarmament, prevented war from resurfacing rather than the treaty's implementation. In conclusion, the GFA was exemplary in

its long-term vision of a peaceful future, but failed to alleviate short-term security concerns, and cannot be considered the key to successful conflict resolution in Northern Ireland. 🌿

- 1 Uppsala Conflict Data Program, UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia. 'United Kingdom: Northern Ireland'. Last accessed 30 May 2013, at: http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdatabase/gpcountry.php?id=163®ionSelect=8-Western_Europe
- 2 Belfast Peace Agreement (1998), p. 3
- 3 Uppsala Conflict Data Program, UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia. 'United Kingdom: Northern Ireland'
- 4 Uppsala Conflict Data Program, UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia. 'United Kingdom: Northern Ireland'

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