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BREXIT

The Future of Northern Ireland

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This paper aims to understand the impact of Brexit on the politically turbulent region of Northern Ireland, and what are the possible events which can unfold for the region. The paper is going to first focus on the historical context of Northern Ireland, followed by the reflection on the Good Friday Agreement, a central document for maintaining peace in the region. This is followed by the trajectory of the Brexit and how that impacts Northern Ireland - given that European Union has been a significant platform for the region to leverage its interests. We will conclude by looking into what the situation is now and the possibilities that can happen in the future.

Introduction

Brexit involved a very long lasting and tedious rounds of talks for about five years between the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) . The process of getting out of the EU cost the UK not only two of its Prime Ministers but also an increasingly politically turbulent scenario in the country with two of its regions - Scotland and Northern Ireland showing the growing demand of staying within the EU and/or a possible independence from the nation and the government being under immense pressure and criticism. If things only get worse from what it already is, Brexit will end up being the catalyst which would not only bring out the deep divide the regions of the United Kingdom have within themselves which exist ever since its creation, but it might also threaten its existence and spill out a streak of civil wars. And the region which has the highest possibility of violence dominating the political space and process is Northern Ireland, which has already witnessed a civil war infamously called The Troubles from the 1960s to the 1998. And this isn't the first time the region witnessed and experienced the violence on its streets and it might not be last either, seeing the street violence the region has witnessed in the recent months. To understand the nuances of this phenomenon, we will first look into the historical background of Northern Ireland followed by what the Brexit entailed followed by how Brexit impacts the region.

Historical Background of Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is geographically much closer to Republic of Ireland than it is to Britain and other regions of the United Kingdom. And, ethnically and historically speaking, these two Irelands have belonged to the same country for centuries and are much closer to one another. This is the reason why there has been a brewing demand of Northern Ireland becoming independent of the United Kingdom. They also share a land border which turned out to be a major point of contestation not

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only for Northern Ireland at the time of Brexit negotiations but also for trade policies, and trade process in the region, which was more of the concern and priority for the United Kingdom. The historical developments that led to the alienation of Northern Ireland from the rest of the region and ultimately joining the United Kingdom in 1921, actually has its starting point in the 12th century with William the Conqueror progressing to capture Ireland after capturing England. However, with the coming of Renaissance period and the emergence of Protestants in Europe and especially in England became the real start of all the trouble we see even today. Ireland was a land with overwhelming majority of Catholics and therefore it has been in a very uncomfortable position to be ruled by Protestant rulers (majority of the times) from England. However with the Plantation of Ulster, which was an organised colonialism of the region under the rule of King James I, Britain was successful to have one region of Ireland being dominated by Protestants, and these developments, from an Irish point of view, has posed a continuous threat to their indigenous culture and language. The region of Ulster is now what we call Northern Ireland.

However, the 'partition' of Ireland into Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State was the result of Irish War of Independence in 1919-21 and the Easter Rising, and it certainly was very violent. In the period of 1920s-70s this partition became the main aspect and the deciding factor in UK's relations with Ireland. The border between Northern Ireland and Ireland not only became the focal point of their relations but also became the hotspot for the Irish Nationalists show their dissent against the Unionists and the British. The Partition not only highlighted irreconcilable divisions made by centuries of subjugation through the British policies but it also left a sizeable minority of Nationalists in Northern Ireland isolated from the larger Ireland as a whole. This is a force which is gaining ground in the political scenario of Northern Ireland as a result of Brexit.

The Good Friday Agreement (GFA)

In order to stabilise the situation in the Northern Ireland which was torn by years of civil war and political violence, there was a referendum conducted in 1998, which, with about 71% of Northern Ireland's support, led to the formation of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), also known as the Belfast Agreement. The aim of this agreement was to establish peace in Northern Ireland by encouraging cooperation between Northern and South of Ireland and also between UK and Ireland. The GFA has not only been instrumental in establishing peace, law and order in Northern Ireland, but has also facilitated in fostering healthy exchange and relations between the North and South. It has led to some needed constitutional changes of both of UK and Ireland. It has also provided with the mechanism to allow Northern Ireland to retain its identity and exercise some power and rights within the region, which was in a very precarious position prior to GFA and seems to be the case again in our contemporary times.

One of the most concerning impact of Brexit vis-a-vis Northern Ireland is the undermining of the GFA and its possible failure of implementation, something which has also been pointed out by the United States of America (USA) and is a really serious threat for Northern Ireland. This is a

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looming scenario now because of the increasingly integral role the EU came to play in the region prior to Brexit. The border between Ireland and UK in Northern Ireland wasn't a necessarily a concern since both the countries were a member of the EU. This is the aspect which caused delays and discords between the UK and EU during their Brexit talks and their tiresome attempts to come at a conclusion and strike a deal with one another.

However with the Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol - the result of Boris Johnson agreeing to let Northern Ireland effectively be a part of the EU in order to get done with Brexit within the deadline, the immediate threat of the failure of GFA is avoided for now, however the actors involved - the UK, EU and Ireland really need to work closely in order to maintain peace and political stability in Northern Ireland - which unfortunately, is much tougher than we realise and is a tedious process and is very fragile as we discuss the situation here.

Brexit - The Trajectory in Brief

Brexit - which basically means the exit of the UK from the EU, has been a political phenomenon whose agenda was somewhat expected but definitely not in the way it came into being and the way it was carried out. The growing voices in favour of Brexit in Britain, despite the repeated appeals of then Prime Minister David Cameroon, led to the whole of United Kingdom undergoing the snap referendum on 2016. It resulted to United Kingdom officially starting the procedure of exiting the EU and the resignation of Cameroon, who did not support the idea of Brexit in the slightest. There were 52% votes in favour of Brexit and 48% for staying in the EU. However these numbers vary region - wise. In Northern Ireland, 55% of the voters wished to remain in the EU and in Scotland the proportion was even higher with 62% votes in favour of remaining with the EU. These differences are an indicator of the possible the rebirth of violent conflicts of Northern Ireland - which is a closer to reality now, in 2021, along with hindering of cross border relations with Ireland. In other words, it is an indicator of complete undermining of the GFA and unravelling of political instability in Northern Ireland. Back in 2016, shortly after the announcement of the result, Northern Ireland's Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, a Nationalist, called for a referendum of the unification of the Irish island, a possibility which is definitely gaining momentum with time.

This is because Northern Ireland, along with Scotland, since the Devolution Act of 1998, have the status of a devolved administrations under the United Kingdom. In the case of Northern Ireland, however, it was an integral part of the GFA which has also led to sharing of power within the executive of the Northern Ireland and the reserved powers being at the hands of the government of the UK. This may sound good on paper, but it turned out to be problematic on the ground reality. This has led to the Scottish and Northern Irish administration being compromised and made to follow the lines of the interests of the UK, at the cost of their own regional requirements.

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This arrangement was still still acceptable for both the regions prior to Brexit since the multilevel institutional framework of the EU enabled these regional administrations to participate in the process of lobbying and networking via the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions. However, with Brexit, the inevitable forthcoming of an English - centric government has further alienated the regions, especially Northern Ireland. This is another way of understanding the importance of GFA for Northern Ireland and how now it is in a jeopardy.

Northern Ireland and the European Union

By the discussion so far, we have seen how important EU ended up being for Northern Ireland over the years. It has been an important forum for lobbying for Northern Ireland even before the Good Friday Agreement came into being. EU became instrumental in not only implementing the GFA and improving relations between the two Irelands, it also became the means through which the leaders could lobby and coordinate with one another - which was simply not possible in the English - centric governmental structure. To protect and create a network to advance the Northern Irish interests, the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe was created in 1990, which later got dissolved and was basically succeeded by the Northern Ireland Executive Office in Europe, which was created after the 1998 devolution. This by itself indicates the centrality and importance of the European Union and why it was a significant focus for Northern Ireland.

Therefore immediately after the Brexit, it was inevitable for the forces for Unification in the region to rise and enjoy support, which is slowly only growing and heightening the discord and political chaos in the region. The situation would only become worse if the economy of Northern Ireland gets un-proportionately gets impacted due to tariffs in the land border and creates a further divide between the rest of the UK and Northern Ireland. It'll cause further alienation.

The Current Situation and Conclusion

Religion is a prominent factor in the political developments of Northern Ireland, that is the case even in our contemporary times. Even with the looming pandemic which has also impacted Northern Ireland, there is an ever increasing spillover of politics of violence with brewing tensions among the various political factions of the region. The situation is so sensitive that even the smallest of "controversy" can lead to violence and possible loss of lives in Northern Ireland. The visuals of violence ridden is not new to Northern Ireland - but to get out of that picture, it took more than 30 years for Northern Ireland to do so, that too with the help of United Kingdom and the presence of the European Union. Along with this, the suspension and withdrawal of Brexit related checks and inspection staff in the region only makes the situation even worse and more tense. This is ultimately

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the result of Boris Johnson rushing the deal and accepting that Northern Ireland will effectively exist within EU while the rest of the UK withdraws, also called the Northern Ireland Protocol, this did help in avoiding the problem of determining the borders with Ireland again, but it only led to over control of movement of goods between the Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This has only led to growing political dissatisfaction and a sense of alienation within the Northern Irish political class and its society. The vaccine politics between the EU and the UK, has further fuelled the political discord within Northern Ireland. The situation could possibly turn out to be much worse than what it did during The Troubles period, but the reaction is still subdued due to the pandemic restrictions and lockdown in the region. But this is still a temporary relief and the people's frustrations, are rightfully, only increasing.

There is an imminent threat of a full fledged civil war in Northern Ireland and a possible demand for reunification of the Irish island being much closer than one would like to admit, along with a looming health crisis and a depleting economy. Therefore, it is an urgent requirement to come at a proper legal and political solution when it comes to Northern Ireland and it needs a mechanism which enables Northern Ireland to independently present its own interests for itself. In other words, referendum seems to be the most peaceful way ahead. This is more so because, if the decision on Northern Ireland is imposed upon it by the EU and the UK without considering its specific requirements at a time when the public is at edge and the situation is literally like a volcano about to burst out its lava at any moment, its going to spill over as a disaster which could clearly be avoided and handled with sensitivity. All it needs is a trigger, no matter how insignificant it might seem to be, objectively speaking, before it finally bursts and everything can possibly go out of control. One can hope for the best, but in situations like these, its better to be prepared for the worst.

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