The Cutting Edge

Sicilian Najdorf 6.\texttt{e3}

By

Milos Pavlovic

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Topalov Variation

8.\(d2\) b4 9.\(\triangle a4\) \(\triangle bd7\)

Variation Index

1.e4 c5 2.\(\triangle f3\) d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.\(\triangle xd4\) \(\triangle f6\) 5.\(\triangle c3\) a6 6.\(\triangle e3\) e6 7.f3 b5 8.\(d2\)

8...b4 9.\(\triangle a4\) \(\triangle bd7\)

A) 10.c4 bxc3 11.\(\triangle xc3\) \(\triangle b7\) 12.\(\triangle e2\) \(\triangle e7\) 13.0–0 0–0
   A1) 14.\(\triangle ac1\)
   A2) 14.\(\triangle fc1\)
B) 10.0–0–0
   B1) 10...\(\triangle a5\) 11.b3 \(\triangle b7\)
   B11) 12.\(\triangle b1\)
   B12) 12.a3
   B2) 10...d5
C) 10.\(\triangle c4!\)
D) 10.g4 h6
   D1) 11.h4
   D2) 11.0–0–0 \(\triangle e5\)
      D21) 12.\(\triangle xb4\)
      D22) 12.b3

A2) after 15.\(\triangle ab1\)
D21) after 19...e5
D22) note to 14...\(\triangle c7\)
This very complicated and modern line can be split into two set-ups, according to whether White plays $8.d2$ or $8.g4$, which we cover respectively in this chapter and the next. But first I would like to say a few words on these systems. They are new and ultra-sharp, and their trademark is that Black hurries to push ...$b4$, regardless of the potential weakness of the $b$-pawn after this early excursion. Topalov introduced this idea, and in the past few years it has stood the test of time well. Ahead of us are two highly complicated and interesting chapters.

1.e4 c5 2.$\text{d}f3$ d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.$\text{d}x$xd4 $\text{f}$f6 5.$\text{c}c3$ a6 6.$\text{e}$e3 e6 7.$f$3 b5 8.$d$2 $b$4 9.$a$a4 $\text{b}$d7

This positional approach has been used by Leko, Anand and Morozevich when confronted with Black's idea. After the usual 10...bxc3, White's knight will come back into game, and the queenside majority, together with the open c-file, gives White chances to play for the advantage. On the other hand, it is not easy to prevent the central thrust ...$d$5, with which Black will open central lines and thus activate his pieces.

10...bxc3

This is not the only move, although it is the most frequently played. The main alternative is 10...$c$7. Although this allows White to keep the $c$4-$e$4 pawn structure, the position remains closed and Black has the $c$5-square for his knight. Play may continue: 11.$c$e2 $b$8 12.0–0 $c$7 13.a3 bxa3 14.xxa3 0–0 15.c1

A) 10.c4
We have a fairly typical hedgehog position. I slightly prefer White here, but nevertheless consider 10...£c7 to be a solid and little investigated alternative to our main line.

11.¤xc3 ¤b7 12.¤e2 ¤c7

Another significant possibility is Topalov’s original idea:
12...d5 13.exd5 ¤xd5 14.¤xd5 ¤c6 15.¤xc1!

This is the best move here, and was introduced by Morozevich. It is important for White to immediately occupy the open c-file. In the stem game of the system, Anand played less accurate 15.0–0, and after 15...£b8 16.¤f5 £e5 17.¤g3 £b4! Black was fine in Anand – Topalov, Sofia 2006.

There are now two major options and I will give them equal attention. White has different ways of bringing his rooks into play: A1) 14.£ac1 and A2) 14.£fc1.

A1) 14.£ac1 £b8 15.£fd1

White has tried several other moves here:

15.a3 £d8N

Or 15...£c8 16.£b4 £d8 17.£h1 £e5 18.£b3 £c6 and now instead of 19.£d1, as played in the game Vasišiu – Jakovljevic, Obrenovac 2007, White should prefer 19.£a5?!N £xa5 20.bxa5 and I believe that the bishop pair, along with control of the dark squares, secures some advantage for White.

16.b4 d5 17.exd5 ²xd5 18.²xd5 ²xd5 19.²h1 £f6

13.0–0 0–0

This position has occurred in two games, Morozevich – Grischuk, Moscow 2006 and Carlsen – R. Jones, Crete 2007, both of which showed that White has an undisputable advantage.
This looks good for Black; the pressure along the d-file and centralized pieces is just what Black is aiming for.

15.\texttt{c2}

Seemingly preparing to double rooks, although the c1-square may also provide an interesting spot for the white queen.

15.\texttt{d8}

The alternative is 15...\texttt{d5}N 16.\texttt{exd5} \texttt{xd5} 17.\texttt{xd5} \texttt{xd5}, which also looks not bad for Black.

16.\texttt{c1}

Another approach would be: 16.\texttt{fc1} \texttt{d5} 17.\texttt{exd5} \texttt{xd5} 18.\texttt{e1} \texttt{d6} 20.g3 \texttt{b7}

Black has reached his optimal set-up and the position is quite unbalanced, Blehm – Voysha, USA 2008.

16.\texttt{e5}

Not the only move, as I think Black can go for 16...\texttt{d5}, for example: 17.\texttt{exd5} \texttt{xd5} 18.\texttt{c6} \texttt{xc6} 20.\texttt{xc6} \texttt{f6} with counterplay.

17.\texttt{b3} \texttt{h5} 18.\texttt{h3} \texttt{g6} 19.\texttt{d1} \texttt{h4}

Here as well, Black misses a good opportunity to break in the centre: 19...\texttt{d5} 20.\texttt{exd5} \texttt{xd5} 21.\texttt{c6} \texttt{xc6} 23.\texttt{xd8} 24.\texttt{xc6} \texttt{f4} 25.\texttt{c7} 26.\texttt{d5} 27.\texttt{f2} \texttt{g6} 28.\texttt{f3} \texttt{b6} Black has reasonable counterplay. This line is not forced, but it clearly shows Black’s potential.

20.\texttt{a4} \texttt{d5} 21.\texttt{b6}

White obtained some initiative in Fedorov – Gabrielian, Voronezh 2008.

15.\texttt{b4} \texttt{d5}

Also possible is: 15...\texttt{d8} 16.\texttt{a4} \texttt{d5} 17.\texttt{exd5} \texttt{xd5} 18.\texttt{c6} \texttt{xc6} 20.\texttt{axb5} (or 20.\texttt{xb5} and after 20...\texttt{c5} 21.\texttt{a1} a draw was agreed in Korneev – Vera, La Roda 2009) 20...\texttt{d6} 21.h3 \texttt{c5} with counterplay.

16.\texttt{exd5} \texttt{xd5} 17.\texttt{xd5} \texttt{xd5} 18.\texttt{a3} \texttt{d6} 19.\texttt{f4} \texttt{b7} 20.\texttt{f3} \texttt{f6} 21.\texttt{xd5} \texttt{xd5} 22.\texttt{c6} \texttt{sc8} 23.\texttt{xd1}

The position is unclear.

15.\texttt{d8}

Again it is very natural for Black to consider ...\texttt{d5} here, although I haven’t seen it suggested in this particular position:

15...\texttt{d5}N 16.\texttt{exd5} \texttt{xd5} 17.\texttt{xd5} \texttt{xd5} 18.\texttt{c6}

18.\texttt{c4} is possible, but after 18...\texttt{b4} 19.\texttt{e2} \texttt{f6} 20.\texttt{xd5} \texttt{xd5} 21.\texttt{c6} \texttt{b7} 22.\texttt{xb4} \texttt{xe3}! Black equalizes.

18...\texttt{xc6} 19.\texttt{xc6} \texttt{f6} 20.\texttt{b6}

After 20.\texttt{xa6} \texttt{d8}, Black secures good play.

20.\texttt{e8} 21.\texttt{c4} \texttt{c8}

Black obtains good counterplay with either ...\texttt{d8} or possibly ...\texttt{c5}.

16.\texttt{h1}
16.\(f4!\) is an interesting move. White aims to restrict Black’s \(\ldots d5\) idea and may follow up with \(\text{b3-a5}\) if he is given time. 16..\(\text{h5!?}\) (in Firat – Paikidze, Kirishi 2008, Black played 16..\(\text{c5}\) and after 17.\(g3\) \(\text{c6}\) 18.\(\text{a4}\) White had some initiative) 17.\(\text{g5}\) \(\text{f5}\) 18.\(\text{xg5}\) \(\text{h6}\) 19.\(\text{g3}\) \(\text{f6}\) 20.\(\text{e2}\) \(\text{e7}\) 21.\(\text{f1}\) \(\text{d6}\) 22.\(\text{f2}\) \(\text{d7}\) 23.\(\text{d1}\) \(\text{e8}\) 24.\(\text{a4}\) \(\text{b5}\) 25.\(\text{xb5}\) \(\text{d8}\)

Now we have a position that is more or less equal, provided Black avoids entering into a worse endgame after: 19..\(\text{d5?!}\) 20.\(\text{exd5}\) \(\text{xd5}\) 21.\(\text{xb8}\) \(\text{dxb8}\) 22.\(\text{xd5}\) \(\text{xd5}\) 23.\(\text{b3}\) \(\text{a5}\) 24.\(\text{b5}\) \(\text{f6}\) 25.\(\text{a4}\)

Another idea that has been played here is 16.\(\text{f2}\), and after 16..\(\text{g6}\) 17.\(\text{c2}\) \(\text{c8}\) 18.\(\text{a4}\) \(\text{d5}\) 19.\(\text{exd5}\) \(\text{b6}\) 20.\(\text{a5}\) \(\text{bxd5}\), the position was unclear in Brkic – Rezan, Split 2008.

16..\(\text{d5}\) 17.\(\text{exd5}\) \(\text{exd5}\) 18.\(\text{exd5}\) \(\text{xd5}\) 19.\(\text{c4}\) \(\text{f6}\) 20.\(\text{e2}\) \(\text{b7}\) 21.\(\text{b3}\) \(\text{h6}\)

Black is fine. I will give the rest of the game, so that readers can see some of the methods of playing this type of position.

22.\(\text{f2}\) \(\text{d7}\) 23.\(\text{c2}\) \(\text{c4}\) 24.\(\text{xc4}\) \(\text{xd8}\) 25.\(\text{e1}\) \(\text{d6}\) 26.\(\text{c2}\) \(\text{e8}\) 27.\(\text{d6}\) \(\text{e8}\) 28.\(\text{b4}\) \(\text{e5}\) 29.\(\text{a5}\) \(\text{b5}\) 30.\(\text{c5}\) \(\text{d5}\) 31.\(\text{xf8}\) \(\text{xf8}\) 32.\(\text{e1}\) \(\text{d8}\) 33.\(\text{b3}\) \(\text{d1}\) 34.\(\text{xd1}\) \(\text{xd1}\) 35.\(\text{c8}\) \(\text{b7}\) 36.\(\text{xd1}\) \(\text{e4}\) 37.\(\text{fxe4}\) \(\text{g4}\) 38.\(\text{c5}\) \(\text{b8}\)


A2) 14.\(\text{fc1}\)

This is a different approach, in which White wants to push his pawns on the queenside.

14..\(\text{b8}\) 15.\(\text{ab1}\)

Hurrying to push the pawns without preparation is nothing special. For instance: 15.\(\text{b4}\) \(\text{d5}\) 16.\(\text{exd5}\) \(\text{exd5}\) 17.\(\text{xd5}\) \(\text{xd5}\) 18.\(\text{a3}\) \(\text{e8}\) with a good game for Black.

15..\(\text{d5N}\)

Another idea might be 15..\(\text{d8}\)\(\text{N}\), when a logical continuation is: 16.\(\text{b4}\) \(\text{d5}\) 17.\(\text{b5}\) \(\text{xb5}\) 18.\(\text{xb5}\) \(\text{d6}\) 19.\(\text{f1}\) \(\text{a6}\) Black has decent counterplay.
The move Black has tried in practice doesn’t look convincing to me: 15...\textunderscore c8 16.b4 \textunderscore e5 (16...d5 17.exd5 \textunderscore xd5 18.\textunderscore xd5 \textunderscore xd5 19.\textunderscore xc8\textasciitilde \textunderscore xc8 20.a4 h6 21.a5 looks to be exactly what White is wishing for) 17.b5 \textunderscore c4 18.\textunderscore xc4 \textunderscore xc4 19.bxa6 \textunderscore xa6 20.\textunderscore e2 and White is much better, Erenburg – Vovsha, Pawtucket 2008.

16.exd5 \textunderscore xd5 17.\textunderscore xd5 \textunderscore xd5 18.\textunderscore c6
Attempts like 18.b4 \textunderscore d6 19.\textunderscore h1 \textunderscore xh2 20.b5 axb5 21.\textunderscore xb5 \textunderscore f6 or 18.\textunderscore f5 \textunderscore f6 both look fine for Black.

18...\textunderscore xc6 19.\textunderscore xc6 \textunderscore d8 20.\textunderscore c2
The alternative is: 20.\textunderscore e1 a5 21.\textunderscore h1 \textunderscore b7 22.\textunderscore c2 \textunderscore f6 23.\textunderscore g1 \textunderscore d5

This set-up occurs so often in this line that I must advise readers to pay it particular attention. It should be pointed out that the bishop pair, along with the queenside majority, would be enough for White to win a simple endgame with just two minor pieces on each side. But here, with queens on the board and many weak squares in the white position, as well as the centralized position of the black pieces, matters are much more complicated. The advantage can go to either side.

20...\textunderscore d6 21.h3 a5 22.\textunderscore h1 \textunderscore f4 23.\textunderscore g1 \textunderscore f6

Black has good play. Again we have a similar structure and positioning of the minor pieces.

\textbf{B) 10.0–0–0}

We continue our survey with this extremely sharp continuation. White is simply developing, without worrying overmuch about Black’s chances of undermining the knight on a4. The subsequent play will be all about which side is more successful in resolving the current situation of this knight. We will look at two major ideas for Black: \textbf{B1) 10...\textunderscore a5} and \textbf{B2) 10...\textunderscore d5}.

\textbf{B1) 10...\textunderscore a5 11.b3 \textunderscore b7}

Now White chooses between the slower \textbf{B11) 12.\textunderscore b1} and the more direct \textbf{B12) 12.a3}. 