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WHITHER BREXIT?

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As the deadline of March 29 approaches when the UK is supposed to leave the European Union, the nightmare of Brexit is reaching a climax. Yet the dreadful truth dawning in London, Brussels and across the EU is that the painful process will probably drag on for many months, if not years, beyond the cut-off date.

This week Theresa May, UK prime minister, will ask her parliament to choose between three options. First, she desperately hopes to win approval for the withdrawal agreement she has negotiated with her 27 partners in the EU. It will be a small miracle if she succeeds. Only two months ago the deal was rejected by a majority of 230, the largest defeat suffered by a UK government in recorded history.

If she loses, she will put a second vote to the 650 MPs, asking if they are willing to crash out of the EU without any deal at all. That is the one subject on which there seems to be a clear majority: only a small number of hard-line Brexiters seriously believe that no deal would be sensible. Most see it as an unmitigated disaster.

So a third vote will then propose an extension of the Brexit deadline. It could be no more than a short “technical” delay to allow time for legislation to enact the withdrawal agreement, or it could be much longer, for example to hold another referendum. That is certainly still on the cards.

It is not sure the rest of the EU will instantly agree to an extension. They have to be unanimous. Any extension longer than two or three months would force the UK to take part in the European elections in May, which would be both legally complex and politically unpopular on both sides of the Channel.

President Macron of France says there must be “a clear plan” from Mrs May. But if the UK parliament is deadlocked – with no majority for any outcome, including another referendum – that may not be easy. On the other hand, no one wants the chaos of a “no-deal” Brexit that would cause massive disruption to the UK and Ireland, not to mention many other EU members. The chances are that they will agree, but with strict conditions.

So how has the UK prime minister got herself into such a weak position on Brexit that she has to beg her MPs to approve a deal they cordially dislike, and then beg Brussels to delay the deadline? And can she get out of it? She will be forced to ask

for a short extension just to get the legislation through the House of Commons to implement the withdrawal deal, in the unlikely event it is approved. If it is not, she will have to seek more time to avoid crashing out, or at least try to curb the chaos.

Mrs May looks like a stubborn negotiator. In fact, she has been playing a hugely risky, multi-layered game of chicken with all her negotiating partners in her desperate efforts to get an acceptable deal on Brexit. She wants them to think she would crash out of the EU with no deal if they don't make more concessions. But the EU-27 don't believe her, although they fear it might happen by accident; while the pro-Brexit fanatics actually want her to do it. The only ones running seriously scared are British businesses and foreign investors in the UK: they have no choice but to make plans for a worst-case scenario, spending huge sums moving jobs abroad and revamping their supply chains.

The greatest weakness in May's strategy has been her inability to unite her own Conservative party and her government behind any coherent plan. Half her party actually wants "no-deal". Most of the rest want to have a "soft" Brexit, keeping close to EU rules to protect the UK economy. A small group – probably less than a dozen MPs – would prefer a second referendum, and hope it votes to revoke Article 50 and remain in the EU.

The Brexiters believe that dire warnings of a "no-deal" catastrophe from UK business and the Bank of England are just a fantasy "Project Fear". The only outcomes they fear are a very soft Brexit – a Norway-plus arrangement that would keep the UK in the EU single market and a customs union – or no Brexit at all, as the result of a second referendum.

Finding a solution is not helped by divisions in the Labour party, between Jeremy Corbyn and lifelong left-wing Eurosceptic, and most of his party membership, who want another referendum. Labour policy has therefore remained ambiguous, officially in favour of a soft Brexit deal that means remaining in a customs union, and retaining maximum single market access, but really hoping that Brexit will be a disaster they can blame on the Conservatives.

Until now, May has never tried to reach out to opposition MPs for a cross-party agreement. She has stuck to wooing the hardline Brexiters with a "hard" Brexit, outside any customs union, and outside the single market. She also needs to win the support of the Democratic Unionist Party, whose 10 MPs guarantee her a slim majority at Westminster.

The Achilles Heel of a hard Brexit is the Northern Irish peace process. An invisible border with the Irish republic was a vital element in winning support for the Good Friday Agreement that brought peace 20 years ago. But if the UK leaves the EU single market and customs union, some sort of checks on cross-border trade would be inevitable. That is why the so-called "backstop" was built into the withdrawal agreement, to ensure there is no return to a hard border, even if the Brexit negotiations drag on way past the planned two-year transition period. It would keep the whole UK in a close customs "arrangement" with the EU, and Northern Ireland even more closely bound to EU single market rules, so that there don't have to be border checks.

But that is anathema to both the DUP and many of the Brexiters. The latter fear it might force the UK to abide indefinitely by EU rules. The DUP sees it as a nail in the coffin of the UK, and a step towards a future united Ireland.

Yet it is the Brexit process, not the backstop, that seems to be reviving thoughts of Irish re-unification. A tracker poll in December by Lucid Talk, a Belfast-based

pollster, suggests that 55 per cent of Northern Irish voters would support a united Ireland if there were a “no-deal” Brexit; it would be a dead heat at 48:48 if Theresa May’s withdrawal agreement went through; and only if Brexit were revoked, and the UK remained in the EU, would there be a clear majority (60 per cent) voting to stay in the UK.

There are signs that both hardline Brexiters and the DUP may be wavering in their opposition to May’s withdrawal agreement. Fear of a second referendum, and losing the prospect of Brexit altogether, is a big factor. But if May loses again, all bets are off. A softer Brexit, no deal by accident, or no Brexit following another referendum, are all possibilities. Outright revocation of Article 50, the simplest solution, is seen as very unlikely. What one can fairly safely predict, however, is that we will not know which it will be by March 29.