

Will Britain press the Brexit self-destruct button?

The narrow referendum result is hailed as a sacred mandate for the hardest versions of Brexit



Anti-Brexit demonstrators protest outside the British parliament.



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Two-and-a-half years ago, when a narrow majority of British voters chose to leave the EU, it would have been inconceivable that, just days before the designated leaving date, nobody would have any idea of how the UK would depart — or even whether it would quit the EU after all. Yet politicians remain deadlocked, while all options remain on the table.

Has any other country in history voted so manifestly against its own economic interests and position in the world? Bank of England scenarios predict a 3.75 per cent hit to gross domestic product by 2023, while a “no-deal” scenario could leave the economy 9.3pc smaller after 15 years, along with a plunge in the value of sterling and house prices, and a near-doubling of unemployment to 7.5pc. Brexit uncertainty has paralysed the UK economy, while US and EU markets have soared. Brexit harms Britain’s future prosperity by impacting research, technological innovation, higher education standards, and access

to overseas markets.

International observers express incredulity: How could rational citizens back this obviously insane idea? How could politicians implement such a calculated act of self-harm? Pro-Brexit slogans about “taking back control” amount to a struggle for the Titanic’s navigation systems as this fatally wounded ship sinks beneath the icy waters.

As a former colonialist power, Britain traditionally invested heavily in diplomacy. Major post-2010 funding cuts hamstringing its ability to be a driving force behind EU foreign policy, with Brexit delivering a fatal blow. The country is also retreating from active involvement in foreign challenges like Iraq, Iran and Syria. When Brazil and India demand the UK’s permanent UN Security Council seat, how can London today claim to be more deserving?

Brexit reflects a confused desire to withdraw from international commitments, and an act of violence against the foreign policy levers that allow Britain to project influence. In an increasingly anarchic and unstable world, isolationism is a pernicious trend among Western states with narrowing perceptions of their global roles, exemplified by Trumpism

and the European far right.

Remainers feel that they are being marched at gunpoint toward the EU exit door, while many young people are angry that an older generation skewed the outcome of a vote that sabotages their future prospects. On both sides, people are sick to death of never-ending Brexit negotiations and just want the issue resolved by any means.

From the outset, pro-Brexit elements were louder and better organised; partly due to illegal funding, Russian meddling, and dishonest campaign claims. Remain advocates tended to be center ground politicians who were reluctant to stand against their party leaders or challenge the 2016 referendum result. Yet Brexit tensions have broken Britain’s long-standing two-party system, with a small but significant number of center ground MPs last week breaking away from both parties to form an independent group; which, given the government’s narrow majority, could play a pivotal role in ongoing brinkmanship.

Months of fruitless efforts by Prime Minister Theresa May to win support for her Brexit plan culminated in a crushing parliamentary defeat in mid-January. She continues to hawk approximately

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the same deal while playing a somewhat sharper game. This includes facing down Brexit extremists, who have waived an earlier demand for scrapping the so-called “backstop” (a provision for ensuring that the Irish border remains open) to avoid their precious Brexit aspirations being scuppered altogether. After decades of conflict, Northern Ireland remains politically precarious and even minor attempts to tweak the border status could provoke renewed tensions, with far-reaching consequences.

Brexit reflects a collective failure of leadership. May in 2016 backed Remain, and since then she has been faced with a deluge of evidence for Brexit’s

ruinous consequences. Her pursuit of Brexit is like a doctor determined to fulfil her patient’s wishes to needlessly amputate their limbs. Why doesn’t she have the guts to tell the public that this is a suicidally painful, unnecessary and destructive process that will leave Britain an impoverished, impotent and marginalised former power?

The departure of MPs from both parties has dictated changes in approach in order to stem this blood loss. The PM has now promised to hold another meaningful vote on her deal on March 12. If that fails to pass, MPs will be given a vote on leaving with no deal (something most would be unlikely to support), followed by a vote on delaying the departure date. The risk is that — given habitually irrational voting patterns — MPs could vote against both a no-deal withdrawal and a time extension. This could legally compel Britain to plunge out of the EU on March 29 without any measures in place — a disaster scenario that all sane minds should be laboring to prevent.

Meanwhile, hard-left Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has finally caved in to pressure from within his own party and agreed to commit to a second referendum, which could al-

low voters to reject Brexit. Indeed, Labour has indicated that it may not vote against May’s deal in exchange for such a public vote. A second referendum, however, would trigger a furious backlash from the right-wing press, which dogmatically denounces such moves as a betrayal of the 2016 vote. The narrow referendum result is hailed as a sacred mandate for the hardest versions of Brexit, yet apparently the British public can’t be trusted to vote responsibly a second time.

A no-deal Brexit could devastate the economy, while endangering supplies of food, medicines and essential services. Jingoistic Brexiteers speak glibly about the “Blitz spirit” and Britain having won the Second World War against the odds. Yet Britain only won that war by standing shoulder-to-shoulder with its continental and international allies. This hubristic desire to “go it alone” in today’s fundamentally interconnected and interdependent world is a self-deluded path that can only lead to national ruin.

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