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THE CURRENT: What's the latest on Brexit?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

Last week, the U.K. and the E.U. reached a new agreement regarding the Britain's withdrawal from the European Union, primarily adjusting what was known as the "backstop" – the question of Northern Ireland's unique political relationship with the U.K. and Ireland. The withdrawal agreement is currently under debate in Parliament, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson pushing for a vote in the coming days that will allow for Brexit to happen by October 31.

With us today is Tom Wright, senior fellow and director of the Center on the United States and Europe, here to catch us up on the current situation and what it means for the U.K., Ireland, and the E.U. Tom, thanks for being here today.

WRIGHT: Thank you for having me.

PITA: So there was this rare vote on Saturday this weekend that forced a request for an extension. Does this new agreement and this weekend vote mean that no-deal Brexit is off the table, or is that still a risk?

WRIGHT: A no-deal Brexit is now probably the least likely outcome in terms of the U.K. leaving without a deal by October the 31st. The only way it could happen would be if the European Union refused the U.K.'s request for an extension, which we have every reason to believe they will not refuse that. I think no-deal is very unlikely. Whether or not Britain leaves with a deal or not or if this extends beyond October 31 in to new elections, I think that's where it's unclear, that's where there's a range of possibilities at the moment.

PITA: Can you explain for us how the new agreement now treats Northern Ireland and whether you think this'll likely be agreeable to the Democratic Unionists, who are wary of any growing division between the north and Great Britain, and to those who are fearful of increased border controls between the republic and the north?

WRIGHT: So, the deal Boris Johnson negotiated with the E.U. is very similar in many respects to Theresa May's old deal. There's a lot in there that's just identical on money that needs to be paid to the EU and the like. The big difference really is Northern Ireland, and that of course is where the prime minister said he wanted a fundamental change. What they've done is they've gone back to a sort of version of a previous deal that Theresa May had floated but then abandoned under criticism from

unionists and some other quarters. Basically, what it says is that the U.K. as a whole – that's including Northern Ireland – will leave the single market and customs union, but then in practice, if you send goods into Northern Ireland, it will be assumed that they're destined for the rest of the E.U. and they will be treated as if Northern Ireland is part of the EU customs union, unless you can present paperwork and file various forms to show that it's actually staying in Northern Ireland. So it's sort of a double customs union. It has the U.K. formally and legally – and Northern Ireland as part of the U.K. customs union – but in practice, the default is it's treated as part of the EU. SO it sort of has access to both markets, which could be a positive.

The other big difference in Northern Ireland is the consent mechanism. So, previously, the backstop was an insurance policy that would come into play unless alternative arrangements were found that would lock in Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom as well, by London's request. On this occasion, after four years, the Stormont Assembly, the regional assembly in Northern Ireland, can opt out by a simple majority vote of this protocol arrangement, and if they do that, it's then a two-year waiting period for them to leave, during which time they could change their mind or there could be negotiations on what comes next.

PITA: Do you think this will be politically agreeable both for the Republic of Ireland and for all parties concerned in Northern Ireland?

WRIGHT: Well, the biggest opponent so far is the DUP, the Democratic Unionist Party, that likes certain elements of the deal, they like the fact that there's a consent mechanism – that was a big demand that they had – and they also like the fact that they're formally part of the U.K. customs union. But they don't like this practical border in the Irish Sea, as it were, where they have to fill in forms and the like to have the movement of goods between Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

And they also have a problem with the consent mechanism because it's a simple majority vote, so it doesn't give their community a veto, and the Good Friday Agreement sort of gives each community a say over major decisions that you need to support a vote. But that would give them an effective veto, so they were sort of opposed to it last week, and the Tories thought maybe they might come on board, maybe they'd abstain, but it's become abundantly clear really, since Saturday, that they are very much opposed to it. So they're now waging, basically, guerilla warfare in the House of Commons by supporting Labour in certain motions, supporting poison pill amendments in the hopes of derailing this. That's sort of not a surprise to those of us who have followed the DUP, because they can be very – I guess one could call it principled or ideological, but they tend to take a stand and not really compromise from it, and they're quite comfortable rejecting an agreement and standing alone. They did that with the Good Friday Agreement as well.

PITA: What can you tell us about this timetable question? Johnson was really pushing for the Commons to be wrapped up in three days, but that may or may not happen – can you spell that all out for us?

WRIGHT: Yeah, it's quite complicated, even to those of us who follow it really closely, but basically, there was an amendment on Saturday that said, the prime minister would have to ask for an extension unless all of the enabling legislation for this deal was passed, which of course it wasn't. So, he then asked for an extension in an unsigned letter. The EU is sitting on that at the moment, but that's presumed to be for political reasons. And he's pushing to get the vote in this week.

Now, he has two problems. One is that the speaker refused to allow him a vote on the deal because he said there was sort of a vote on the deal on Saturday, even though it was derailed by the amendment. He also said in the debate on the enabling legislation that the deal will be debated, but it can be amended. So people could put forward amendments that would sort of wreck the deal. What the prime minister said is he's willing to have a short, ten-day extension to get this deal over the line, but that if the Commons fails to approve his timetable for all this, he'll just pull the legislation, have the extension, and then go to an election, or ask Labour to support an election, which they said they would, if there was an extension.

PITA: How is the EU dealing with this? I understand they've said they won't vote on the agreement until it is done with the U.K.'s parliament. What are we likely to see from their take on the agreement?

WRIGHT: I think the big change in the EU, just at a meta-level, is they sort of now want the U.K. to leave. Not because they like Brexit, they don't, they just feel that too much has happened for this to be easily reversed. They don't really have any hope anymore or any expectation that it will be reversed. They actually would like to help the prime minister get this deal through. They've very supportive of the deal. They're trying, as best as I can tell, not to be unhelpful. They're staying quiet on certain things. They haven't gotten back on the extension request. They've no desire to humiliate the prime minister or to try to show that there's sort of failings in the British approach or anything like that. So, I think they will – the parliament has to approve the deal and some people thought there might be a couple of obstacles there – that's the European Parliament – but I think for the most part it'll be a straightforward ratification. I think they are keen to help him now at this stage, get this deal through.

PITA: Of course, even if Johnson gets his wish and Britain does exit on the 31st, this isn't actually the end of things. There's going to be rounds and rounds and rounds of negotiations to figure out the future of U.K.'s relationship with E.U., but also with the U.S. Can you put this whole question into some context of the broader trans-Atlantic relationship?

WRIGHT: Yeah, so, you're exactly right, this is not the end. It's at best the end of the beginning. This will probably last in total for at least a decade; we're only three years in. The trade deal will take many years to negotiate, Britain will struggle once it does actually leave at the end of the transition period, which runs through next year; it will create problems even if they leave with a deal. At a certain point some people will start to argue for a rejoin campaign, so the next debate will be whether to stay out, or that this experiment hasn't worked and the U.K. should rejoin. And then there's a trade deal with the U.S. So all of that will consume British politics for the foreseeable future.

In terms of the U.S. side of it, one thing that the deal does, which is quite good for U.S.-U.K. relations, is that it removes the Democratic objection to the trade deal because it might jeopardize the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland. This agreement protects that, so it allows the trade deal to go ahead. Now, there's other problems with the trade deal and other difficulties that will have to be ironed out, but that was probably the biggest one in that the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, said she'd oppose any deal, and she had broad support from her own party and some Republicans, to stop any deal that jeopardized the peace in Northern Ireland. So, that is off the table, so that's a good thing.

The broader context really is a U.S.-Europe relationship which is very fraught, especially under President Trump. We've seen relationships deteriorate; they haven't really been able to work on

anything positive together. The relationship is defined by areas of disagreement like trade, defense spending, energy, and Iran – other sort of thorny issues. Meanwhile, technology, the rise of China, climate change, issues that might be more unifying are sort of cast aside. We have a scorecard we do quarterly at the Center for the U.S. and Europe that shows – the latest iteration is just out this week – that shows overall U.S.-European relations declining from a quite low base already, with the one exception being U.S.-U.K. relations. So I think it's a tough time for trans-Atlantic relations, but the good news if a future president wants to deepen the relationship, there's a lot of low-hanging fruit and issues they can cooperate on.

PITA: Great. Tom, thanks so much for being here today.

WRIGHT: Thanks so much for having me.