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## Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and a lopsided special relationship

The new foreign policy formula is simple: the president tweets and the leadership hopeful jumps

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Philip Stephens JULY 18, 2019

This is no time for squeamishness. Within a week, Boris Johnson expects to be Britain’s prime minister. He has already set the direction for the nation’s foreign policy. [No more Europe](#). The new formula is simple: Donald Trump tweets and Mr Johnson jumps.

As was obvious during his dismal spell as foreign secretary, Mr Johnson is no grand strategist. He seems to have grasped, though, that once he has torn Britain out of the EU, the goodwill of a capricious US president is just about all there is left. Now we know what the Brexiters meant when they promised the sunlit uplands of “Global Britain”.

First, though, he must wrap up Brexit. Mr Johnson intends an early European tour if, as is likely, he wins the ballot for the Conservative leadership. Paris, Berlin and Dublin are on the list. He may encounter some bumps along the way.

[His long record](#) of mendacity and an infantile habit of comparing the EU to [Nazi Germany](#) have not created a reservoir of trust among other European leaders. They are unimpressed by his “do-or-die” threat of a no-deal Brexit.

Mr Johnson’s crude English exceptionalism is even less endearing. At the Foreign Office he was heard to muse as to whether Chancellor Angela Merkel had served in East Germany’s Stasi secret police. French president Emmanuel Macron was a “jumped-up Napoleon”. As for

Ireland's prime minister, Leo Varadkar, "Why isn't he called Murphy like all the rest of them". Such jibes find a way back to foreign capitals.

Mr Johnson has had nothing useful to say about Brexit. He may mean it when he threatens to take Britain out of the Union by October 31, with or without a deal. But there is no certainty he can secure a majority in parliament for crashing out. My sense is that the odds are stacked against it. This, of course, may well have been part of his calculation when he decided to boast about driving over the Brexit cliff.

Some say Mr Johnson's real plan has always been to seek a form of words from the EU27 that would allow him to claim he had sufficiently diluted post-Brexit arrangements for the Irish border — the so-called Irish backstop in the withdrawal agreement. With help from Labour rebels he would then get the deal through the House of Commons. The prospect always looked remote and even more so now, after Mr Johnson ruled out a fudge by insisting the backstop must be scrapped in its entirety.

Plan B, allies say, is to persuade Ms Merkel and Mr Macron into bullying Mr Varadkar simply to drop Ireland's insistence on the backstop. I struggle to see Germany and France ganging up against a loyal, solidly pro-European member to bail out one scurrying for the exit.

More likely, Britain is still faced with the same series of improbable outcomes to the Brexit saga: an even longer spell in Article 50 limbo; a general election that neither the Conservatives nor Jeremy Corbyn's hard-left Labour opposition can be confident of winning; or a second referendum. This last would be the sensible course, but getting there would probably require a general election as well as an Article 50 extension.

Unsurprisingly, Mr Johnson has been lobbying hard behind the scenes for an early invitation to Washington. A quick trade deal with Mr Trump, aides whisper, would give him credibility with the EU. There is something awful in their expectation. So low has the nation fallen since the 2016 Brexit vote that the best it can now hope for is a pat on the head from an unpredictable demagogue in the White House, who publicly scorns just about everything Britain cherishes.

Mr Johnson has often been [deliberately careless](#) with his language about ethnicity. But ingratiating himself with a president whose ugly attacks on minorities tip over into white supremacy? The best that can be said is that even Mr Johnson felt obliged to distance himself from Mr Trump's [recent tirade](#) against four Democratic members of Congress.

The supplicant Mr Johnson showed through in his response to the furore stirred up by the leaking of some dispatches written by Kim Darroch, Britain's ambassador to Washington. Mr Trump exploded at the grim, but entirely accurate, characterisations of his presidency. The prime minister-in-waiting threw [Sir Kim overboard](#).

Mr Trump dislikes the EU as much as do the Brexiters. So he might well be inclined to offer Mr Johnson a "quick win". The puzzle is that anyone thinks the president cannot wait to sign (or

Congress to ratify) a generous trade deal. Mr Trump has a policy called America First. It means what it says. The US prioritises its national interests over everything else. There is no small print exception for Britain.

In any event, the lopsided nature of the transatlantic relationship is not just about Mr Trump. As close as the ties often have been, Americans have never been sentimental about them. The dewy-eyed guff about eternal bonds of kith and kin and the rest has always come from the British side — a confection created by Winston Churchill to give emotional force to the idea of a “special relationship”.

In Washington, Britain’s influence is measured by how useful an ally it can be. The irony is that Brexit leaves it with less to offer. It can no longer speak up for the US in the councils of Europe. The Tory prime minister Harold Macmillan invented the conceit that Britain could serve as wise Greeks to America’s Rome. Life will be simpler for Mr Johnson. Just think servant and master.

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