Only Boris Johnson 'can defeat Farage'

No-deal Brexit best way to eliminate threat to Tories
by Joergen Oerstroem Moeller in Singapore

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The UK’s exit from the European Union is no longer about the future relationship between the two sides. It is not even about whether the Conservative party can be kept together. It has turned into an operation to stop Nigel Farage, leader of the victorious Brexit party in the European Parliament elections, from destroying the Tories.

Prime Minister Theresa May's withdrawal agreement never got House of Commons support. The Conservative party suffered fresh humiliation in the European elections. This marked the end of May’s premiership, who will step down as party leader on 7 June, although she says she will stay on as caretaker prime minister until the party chooses a new chief.

The number of candidates for the leadership is now in double figures, with Boris Johnson, former foreign secretary, by far the favourite to replace May.

A probable outcome at the end of October – the deadline for Brexit – is that Boris Johnson, by then prime minister, will declare that the EU has not responded to his generous offer and consequently, his country has no choice but to leave without a deal.

This would sharpen the Conservatives' existential crisis. The threat comes from Nigel Farage, whose Brexit party won more than 30% of the vote in last week's poll. The challenge for the Tories is to find a leader who can draw the faithful back. Johnson is the only one who fits the bill. He can stand up to Farage in populism and slogans. He is of the same breed.

He must convince the Conservative voters – and those who on 23 June 2016 voted Leave – that he is as good as Farage when it comes to Brexit. He will be believed. No other credible candidate for Tory leadership enjoys that privilege.

The idea of a second referendum has been floated, but the last thing Prime Minister Johnson and the Conservatives wish is to fight a battle with Farage on a field of his choosing.

Another option is to restart negotiations and extend the 31 October deadline, but Farage will delight in telling everyone that Boris Johnson is reneging on his promises.

Johnson may decide the only way is to ‘out-Farage’ Farage and steer towards a no-deal Brexit. That would cost support from the Remain wing of the Tory party, but would solidify his position among the other members, so may be worth the price. And one mustn't forget that many Labour voters supported Brexit, making Boris Johnson palatable as leader in view of their own party sliding increasingly towards a customs union or even a second referendum.

Johnson as prime minister would have to attempt to clinch a better deal than May achieved – or at least give the impression he is doing so. He would confront Brussels with an offer tailored to Britain's interests, knowing that the EU27 would not accept it. Then, he would claim that EU intransigence had forced Britain's hand.

In such a scenario it would be near-impossible for Farage to retaliate. He would lack a platform on which to criticise Johnson, who would have delivered a no-deal Brexit after having tried to secure a good deal.

The price for eliminating Farage would be slower economic growth in Britain and a disastrous future relationship with the EU and Ireland. Scotland's flirtation with secession would be rekindled and a similar situation could occur in Northern Ireland.

Johnson would revive the spirit of 1940 and declare that Britain stands alone against the continent, calling for patriotism and national unity. He would outmanoeuvre Farage and label the Labour party 'unpatriotic'. An appeal to close ranks could tempt him to call a general election, but as Theresa May discovered in June 2017, such a move entails high risks.
Joergen Oerstroem Moeller is Associate Research Fellow, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, and a former State Secretary at the Danish foreign ministry.