

Tensions erupt at Brussels summit on British exit from EU

By Johannes Stern and Alex Lantier
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European Union officials adopted a hard line against David Cameron on Tuesday at the final EU summit to be attended by the outgoing British prime minister. The meeting was called in response to last week's referendum vote for a British exit from the EU. Prior to the summit, European and British officials traded bitter attacks in the European parliament, underscoring the intention of the major EU powers to punish the UK for voting to leave the union.

Cameron has announced he will step down after the ruling Conservative Party's annual conference in October, leaving it to his successor to invoke Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty, triggering negotiations on the terms of Britain's exit. Once Article 50 is invoked, a country leaving the EU has two years to renegotiate all treaties and other agreements with the EU before they lapse.

No agreement between Cameron and top EU officials on the Brexit crisis emerged from a working dinner, whose attendees included EU Council President Donald Tusk and EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. The EU decided to exclude Britain from a second day of talks, though Britain is still technically an EU member state, and Cameron went home empty handed.

Arriving at the EU summit, Cameron asked European officials to be "as constructive as possible" with Britain's next prime minister. "These countries are our neighbours, our friends, our allies, our partners, and I very much hope we'll seek the closest possible relationship in terms of trade and cooperation and security, because that is good for us and that is good for them," Cameron said. "And that's the spirit in which the discussions I think will be held today."

On the contrary, leading EU officials, starting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, had the previous

day issued a series of statements pressing for a rapid and punitive exit of Britain from the EU.

In an official address to the German parliament (Bundestag), Merkel adopted a harsh position vis-a-vis Great Britain. She said German officials were "conscious" that Great Britain "does not yet want to file" for Article 50. However, she continued, Great Britain should "be conscious that there can be no negotiations or preliminary discussions so long as the Article 50 procedures have not been launched."

Barely concealing the implied threat in her remarks, the chancellor added, "I can only advise our British friends not to fool around as they prepare to take the decisions that must be taken in Great Britain." Merkel stressed that even though Britain is one of "the closest allies in NATO," Germany and the EU would negotiate with Britain "on the basis of their own interests." She said Berlin would "orient its policy around the interests of German citizens and businesses."

In an especially provocative part of her speech, which was applauded by all the parties present in the German parliament, Merkel said: "We should make sure that the negotiations do not proceed on the basis of cherry-picking. It must make and it will make a noticeable difference whether a country wants or refuses to be a part of the EU family. Anyone who wants to leave this family cannot expect that as all the responsibilities of EU membership are removed, all the rights remain."

Merkel cited the so-called Lisbon Strategy, formulated in 2000, which called for establishing the EU economically and politically as a world power, to justify pushing for an independent EU foreign and military policy: "We all see that the world faces deep unrest. Also in Europe, we face the consequences of oppression, crises, conflicts, and wars in our immediate

neighbourhood. There are foreign and security policy challenges that we Europeans must unfortunately take up ...”

Dutch Finance Minister Jeroen Dijsselbloem echoed Merkel’s hard line, making clear that the EU intended Britain’s exit from the EU to damage that country’s international trade. He attacked Nigel Farage, the head of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), saying Farage was “living in his own world” if he thought Brexit meant Britain would be able to trade on better terms with the EU. Dijsselbloem chided that Farage “thinks Britain is still a world-spanning empire and can dictate everything, and it’s not going to happen like that.”

Reporting on the working dinner he had had with Cameron and Juncker, EU Council President Tusk confirmed that the EU aimed to inflict serious economic damage on Britain, even at the cost of provoking a global recession, in order to make an example of Britain for voting to leave the bloc. EU officials at the dinner made clear, Tusk said, “that Brexit means substantially lower growth in the UK, with a possible negative spillover all over the world.”

The European parliament voted a resolution calling upon Britain to rapidly invoke Article 50 and begin negotiations, following a chaotic parliamentary session dominated by aggressive statements by Farage and EU Commission President Juncker.

Farage called for a “grown-up and sensible attitude to how we negotiate a different relationship,” but then denounced the European parliamentarians to their face, saying, “Most of you have never done a proper job in your lives.” He launched into an anti-immigrant diatribe against Merkel for allowing Middle Eastern refugees into Europe, and called the euro currency a “failure,” adding, “As a policy to impose poverty in Greece and the rest of the Mediterranean, you have done very well.”

Juncker, for his part, turned on UKIP parliamentarians who applauded a statement calling for respect for the Brexit referendum vote and told them to leave Brussels. He snapped: “That’s the last time you are applauding here... To some extent I am really surprised that you are here. You were fighting for the exit, the British people voted in favour of the exit. Why are you here?”

The EU’s vindictive policy toward Britain and the escalating conflicts between British and EU officials

shed light on the deep divisions that have built up throughout the EU, especially since the 2008 financial crisis and the austerity policies imposed in its aftermath. Now, tensions are exploding not only between Britain and Brussels, but throughout the EU.

On Monday, Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski blamed “the leadership of the European Union” for “mistakes,” and said that “at least a part of the European leadership should suffer the consequences.” He called the Brexit vote a “defeat,” and demanded that “new politicians and experts... work on new proposals for both Great Britain and Europe.” He announced that Poland might present “radical” proposals at the EU summit, including “a new European treaty” that would give “the main power in the EU to the European Council, not the Commission.”

The right-wing and notoriously anti-Russian governments in Poland and the Baltic countries regard Brexit as a threat that could not only weaken the military buildup against Russia before the upcoming NATO summit in Poland, but also undermine the NATO Alliance as a whole. Arriving in Brussels and asked by reporters about the possibility that Britain in the end might turn around and decide to stay in the EU, Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite took a noticeably different line from Merkel, saying, “Welcome, welcome back!”

After meeting US Secretary of State John Kerry on Monday, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg made clear that the military alliance does not want a change in its relationship with London. “The UK is a strong and committed ally, responsible for almost one-quarter of defence spending among European NATO allies,” he declared, adding, “The Warsaw Summit will be important for the whole of Europe because we will make decisions on deterrence and defence, on projecting stability to our neighborhood, and on how we can enhance and further strengthen cooperation with the EU.”

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