

## 《英国脱欧谈判今日上演》

Brexit negotiations between the UK and the EU kick off on Monday, as the UK's Brexit Secretary David Davis meets with EU negotiator Michel Barnier in Brussels.

While the European Commission is determined to focus on EU citizens' rights, the UK's divorce bill and Northern Ireland's border first, Britain insists that its withdrawal and future relationship with the EU should be discussed at the same time.

The talks could not have come at a worse time for Britain, with Prime Minister Theresa May's position considerably weakened following the disastrous election results earlier this month.



British Prime Minister Theresa May arrives in Downing Street in central London, Britain, June 14, 2017. /Reuters Photo

## Different agendas

The talks will begin at 11:00 a.m. Brussels time (10:00 a.m. GMT), continue over a working lunch, and wrap up in early evening with a joint press conference by Davis and Barnier.

Monday is only a beginning of the Brexit talks, which are set to continue every month throughout the summer.

Davis and Barnier want to start the talks with different agendas. London is trying to negotiate with the EU on their trade relations after Brexit right away, whereas Brussels has warned that the two sides must agree on the divorce itself before moving on to trade talks.



British Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union David Davis arrives at Downing Street in central London, Britain, June 13, 2017. /VCG Photo

"The opening of negotiations at political level next week will focus on issues related to citizens' rights, the financial settlement, the Northern Irish border and other separation issues, as part of the sequenced approach to the talks," the European Commission said in a statement last Friday. "Both sides will also discuss the structure of the negotiations and the issues that need to be addressed over the coming months."

In response, a spokesman for Davis's Brexit department said: "As we set out in the Article 50 letter, our view is that withdrawal agreement and terms of the future relationship must be agreed alongside each other."

He added, "the withdrawal process cannot be concluded without the future relationship also being taken into account," stressing that "nothing is agreed, until everything is agreed."



EU Chief Negotiator for Brexit Michel Barnier. /VCG Photo

The EU hopes to begin negotiations over a trade deal in October if enough progress has been made on divorce matters, a BBC report said, citing EU sources.

This progress reportedly includes a possible demand for an exit payment worth up to 100 billion euros (about 88 billion pounds) by Britain.

Davis has said his country will pay what is legally required, but not "what the EU wants."

"There is no Brexit bill. The final settlement is all about settling the accounts," he said last month.

A softer Brexit?

Besides an assertive EU, Britain's challenges also come from its domestic instability and uncertainties amid the current political chaos and wavering public opinions.

May called a snap election in April to boost her mandate in the Brexit talks. However, the decision backfired as election results on June 8 forced the UK into a "hung parliament."

Having lost an overall majority in the House of Commons, she has to rely on the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in Northern Ireland to prop up her government.

As the DUP advocates a soft border with Ireland, a member of the EU, May could be forced to soften her stance on Brexit – the prime minister said in January that Britain would leave the single market so it could control immigration.



A protest against Brexit in central London, Britain, March 25, 2017. /VCG Photo

Dubbed "the second referendum on Brexit," the election also marked a shift in public opinions. According to a new survey by Survation, 53 percent of people would back a vote on whether to accept the terms of the final Brexit deal,

up from 46 percent in April.

The poll showed only 35 percent of respondents agreed with May that "no deal is better than a bad deal" in the EU and 69 percent were against Britain leaving the EU customs union.

The results suggest an increasing opposition among the public to a "hard Brexit," according to a report by Independent.

Meanwhile, five major UK business bodies, including the British Chambers of Commerce, Confederation of British Industry, EEF, Federation of Small Businesses and Institute of Directors, asked the government to "put the economy first" in the Brexit talks in a letter to Business Secretary Greg Clark, calling for "minimal customs formalities" and a "flexible system" for the movement of labor and skills.

An editorial by Independent said: "As talks open this week, Theresa May's team must accept that a hard Brexit is now impossible."

May's dilemma

However, it is still too early to tell whether the prime minister could embrace a "soft Brexit" – staying in the single market like non-EU members Norway and Switzerland.

As the Sunday Telegraph reported, citing senior Conservative sources, May will face an immediate leadership challenge from Eurosceptic Tory lawmakers if she tries to water down her Brexit approaches.



British Prime Minister Theresa May (R) meets with pro-EU French President Emmanuel Macron at the Elysée Palace in Paris, France, June 13, 2017. /VCG Photo

Some EU diplomats fear May's government could be too fragile to negotiate viable Brexit terms, saying that the talks could collapse with a Conservative leadership contest or another general election in the UK in the near future.

"The risk of breakdown of talks because of a breakdown in the UK has increased – a brutal Brexit without any agreement at all, not because anyone is actively seeking that outcome but just because of a broken down process," Pierre Vimont, a veteran French diplomat, told The Guardian.

Should that happen, the UK would have to swallow a "hard Brexit" anyway, leaving the bloc without any deal, which would be "a very, very bad outcome," British Chancellor Philip Hammond warned.