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WORLD

May Seeks Backing for Draft Brexit Deal From Doubtful Allies

Prime minister is set to put the proposed pact before her deeply divided cabinet on Wednesday



U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May will have to sell a draft Brexit deal to her divided cabinet. PHOTO: SIMON DAWSON/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By Max Colchester in London and Laurence Norman in Brussels

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Negotiators for Britain and the European Union on Tuesday hammered out a draft Brexit deal, setting up a critical endgame in which Prime Minister Theresa May must now try to sell the plan to her skeptical ministers and Parliament.

Following more than two years of wrangling over Brexit, Mrs. May is set to put the proposed pact before her deeply divided cabinet on Wednesday. Her political future and that of her Conservative Party could well depend on the outcome. If the prime minister doesn't get the necessary backing, she could face the prospect of being unseated by her party or forced into calling new elections.

Euroskeptic Tories are wary of any deal that would in their view give Brussels an unwanted say in British affairs or risk effectively sundering Northern Ireland from the rest of the U.K. Boris Johnson, who resigned as foreign minister in July after a clash over Brexit, called the latest compromise “utterly unacceptable.”

Given those divisions, it isn't clear how the final push toward Brexit will play out. If the U.K and EU can't ratify a final deal by March 29 and Britain leaves without an agreement, the economic disruptions could be severe. New elections, on the other hand, could even lead to a rethink on Brexit and a possible second referendum.

Mrs. May spoke to her ministers one at time on Tuesday evening in an effort to corral them behind the draft deal, the terms of which haven't been publicly disclosed.

“The prime minister knows that at least half her cabinet has grave reservations about the emerging deal,” said Mujtaba Rahman, head of Europe at the Eurasia Group, a consulting firm.

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Cabinet members are expected to go into the prime minister's office in Downing Street on Wednesday with a key concern: how negotiators have managed to formulate an agreement ensuring that

no hard border emerges on the island of Ireland after Brexit is implemented.

Several ministers have expressed worry that an insurance policy—or backstop—could come at the possible cost of hiving Northern Ireland off from U.K. rules and regulations. Mrs. May has previously said no prime minister could accept such an outcome.

People familiar with the discussions said the EU has offered a compromise arrangement that would see the whole of the U.K. remain in a customs union with the EU until a trade deal is agreed and takes effect, which could eliminate the need for a border on the island of Ireland.

However, officials said the draft text includes provisions ensuring that if the U.K. exited the customs arrangement, key economic rules for Northern Ireland would remain in line with EU regulations.

That would obviate the need for border checks on products moving between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which will remain in the EU.

If the draft agreement clears her cabinet, Mrs. May must then sell it to Parliament, where her government relies on a fragile alliance with a small Northern Irish party for a majority.

A separate part of the negotiations—a non-legally binding text outlining the future relationship between the U.K. and the EU—is expected to be central to the deal's fate before British lawmakers.

EU officials were cautious on Tuesday, saying a deal isn't yet sealed. European officials and diplomats confirmed talks have advanced in recent days to the point where Mrs. May can set out the proposed agreement to her ministers. They remained wary, however, on whether it would get political backing in London and whether the British government might say further negotiations are needed. "There is a common understanding that needs to be supported by the U.K. government," one senior EU diplomat said.

Ministers of the EU member states may still need to approve the text in coming days before sending it to the bloc's leaders for review at a summit later this month, officials said.

Underscoring the fragility of the draft agreement, the EU earlier Tuesday set out more detail of their planning for a no-deal Brexit, laying out the areas where they would agree to temporary arrangements to ease the disruption next spring if Britain crashes out of the bloc without a deal.

The British pound, seen as a Brexit barometer of sorts, achieved its strongest level against the euro since April after the draft deal was revealed on Tuesday.

Within her own party, Mrs. May is hemmed in by both pro-EU and anti-EU groups who may rebel and vote down the draft agreement.

To get the necessary votes, Mrs. May will likely have to win over Labour opposition lawmakers who want her ousted from power.

"We will look at the details of what has been agreed when they are available," said Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the opposition Labour Party.

"But from what we know of the shambolic handling of these negotiations, this is unlikely to be a good deal for the country."

Write to Max Colchester at max.colchester@wsj.com and Laurence Norman at laurence.norman@wsj.com

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