

UK foreign secretary uses US visit to support Boris Johnson replacing Theresa May as prime minister

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UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt completed a three-day visit to the United States Thursday.

Hunt gave his first major foreign policy speech and met Trump administration officials, but also utilised the trip to deliver an unprecedented endorsement of Boris Johnson, who he replaced as foreign secretary, as a potential “great” replacement for beleaguered Prime Minister Theresa May.

With the Conservative Party and May’s cabinet split into irreconcilable pro- and anti-European Union (EU) factions, Hunt aligned himself with Johnson as the de facto leader of the Tories’ hard Brexit wing.

Asked his thoughts on Johnson by the Axios news website, Hunt said he would make a “great Prime Minister.” Johnson “has changed the course of British history through his campaigning for Brexit. I don’t agree with him on everything, but, you know, who knows for the future?”

Hunt’s comments echoed those of US President Donald Trump and his former adviser and strategist, Steve Bannon, who both effusively endorsed Johnson prior to arriving in the UK last month. In an interview with the pro-Brexit *Sun* attacking the European Union (EU), Trump stated, “We are cracking down right now on the European Union because they have not treated the United States fairly on trading,” adding that Johnson would make a “great prime minister.”

Bannon, who reportedly remains in regular communication with Johnson, later said he would be a “great Prime Minister, not [simply] a good one.”

Hunt told Axios of his own views compared to Johnson’s, “I don’t think that the substance is terribly different, particularly when it comes to relations with the US.”

In his speech to the US Institute for Peace, Hunt struck a

hard-line pose, threatening the EU that, “One of the biggest threats to European unity would be a chaotic no-deal Brexit.

“Britain would, of course, find a way to prosper and we have faced many greater challenges in our history. But the risk of a messy divorce, as opposed to the friendship we seek, would be a fissure in relations between European allies that would take a generation to heal—a geostrategic error for Europe at an extremely vulnerable time in our history.”

Speaking at the United Nations Security Council Thursday, he emphasised that MPs would only accept a Brexit deal consistent with the “letter and spirit” of the 2016 referendum result to leave the EU.

For the hard Brexit faction, the future of May’s premiership is understood in terms of days and weeks—with Johnson’s leadership challenge gathering pace. Hunt is the second leading Brexiteer to endorse him, after the influential Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Though it is now being suggested that the timetable may be extended, the UK still has just eight weeks to conclude a deal with the EU on their future trading terms. Any agreement must be put to a vote in parliament in the autumn.

For May and her opponents alike, winning the support of the Trump administration for a US/UK trade deal is considered vital in pressuring the EU for a trade deal—including access to European markets. But the hard Brexit faction is more prepared for conflict with Brussels than May, who is more amenable to demands from the City of London to maintain tariff-free access to the Single European Market (SEM), on which the UK relies for 40 percent of its trade.

Last month, Johnson resigned as foreign secretary, along with Brexit Minister David Davis, to protest the

agreement May reached with her cabinet in July seeking continued access to the SEM. He is now in pole position for a leadership challenge expected as parliament returns from its summer recess in September.

After meeting Vice President Mike Pence, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and “other key figures in the US administration to discuss the foreign policy challenges we face together,” Hunt stressed, “the United States is our closest ally... Our discussions showed real enthusiasm from the US administration, from the President down, for a UK/US free trade agreement to be reached as soon as possible after we leave the EU, something that will benefit businesses on both sides of the Atlantic.”

Hunt went as far as supporting Trump’s launching of trade war measures against the EU, stating, “I can’t justify why it is that the tariffs are different in one direction compared to the other given that both Europe and the US have similar standards of living.”

His US Institute For Peace speech mapped out the geopolitical imperatives of British imperialism, particularly in ramping up hostility to Russia and demanding support from the EU. He denounced Russia for flouting the “established rules of international conduct,” especially its backing of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, declaring that “Russia’s foreign policy under President Putin has made the world a more dangerous place.”

Hunt’s comments come amid escalating divisions between the US and its European rivals and he portrayed the UK as the most steadfast backer of Washington. He accused Moscow of attempting “to assassinate [Russian double agent] Sergei and [his daughter] Yulia Skripal,” adding that the UK asks its allies to go further by calling on the European Union to ensure its sanctions against Russia are comprehensive, and that we truly stand shoulder to shoulder with the US.”

Provocatively, Hunt declared, “The visible advantage that won NATO the Cold War was military capability. The invisible weapon was a rock-solid alliance of like-minded nations that sat behind it. Those shared values meant no opponent was ever in doubt about our red lines.”

An enormous amount is being invested in securing the support of a US president who Hunt declared, “has not been the isolationist president that many feared he would,” at a time when Trump’s equally reactionary opponents in the Democratic Party are stepping up every effort to remove him in pursuit of a yet-more aggressive stance against Russia and China.

Moreover, whatever the calculations of May, Johnson and Hunt, the future course of events is not decided—with the interests of significant sections of the British ruling elite in sharp conflict with Trump’s agenda.

Cementing economic ties with China, which Trump has continually denounced as the main obstacle to the economic interests of the US, is a strategic issue for London, post-Brexit.

Earlier this year May visited Beijing and secured commercial deals worth around £9 billion. Last month, Hunt’s first trip abroad, just three weeks after assuming the position of foreign secretary, was also to China. Ahead of his visit, Hunt declared it “an important opportunity to intensify our cooperation on shared challenges in international affairs, ranging from global free trade to non-proliferation and environmental challenges, under the UK-China Global Partnership and ‘Golden Era’ for UK-China relations.”

While grandstanding over Russia, Hunt was noticeably low-key on China, so as not to alienate Beijing, during his US visit.

Hunt’s endorsement of Johnson only confirms the most fundamental crisis of all facing the British bourgeoisie—the absence of any popular mandate for the pro-austerity agenda shared by the pro- and anti-EU factions of the ruling elite.

Hunt and Johnson are, if anything, more despised by working people than May. For six years from 2012, Hunt was health secretary and enacted policies accelerating the privatisation and break-up of the National Health Service. In 2016, he enforced an inferior contract on 50,000 junior doctors who fought against it in a bitter year-long strike. Their elevation to leadership would only spur the development of militant industrial and political opposition to the Tories.



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