

DANGER FOR THE IRISH BORDER

Timothy Compston looks at the potential security ramifications of changes to the management of the Irish border post Brexit.

The uncertainty that surrounds the relationship between the UK and the EU as Brexit looms is certainly troubling. This was underscored when international trade secretary Liam Fox suggested the probability of a no deal had increased to 60-40. Alongside the economic implications of Brexit, many are concerned about the ramifications for security the Irish border if we end up with a harder Brexit.

The danger from a security perspective is that a no-deal scenario requires new and visible infrastructure on the 310-mile Irish border and could lead to an escalation in terrorist activity. There is also the question of where the Common Travel Area will fit into the puzzle.

There have been positive noises from those involved in negotiations about the desire to minimise disruption at the border, but only time will tell how issues like freedom of movement and customs will go.

For the EU and Irish Government, the imperative to prevent a hard border is high as they continue to reiterate the importance of having a backstop should no agreement be made. This remains problematic for the British who do not want the result of such a backstop to effectively create a border down the Irish Sea between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

Some may argue that the danger of a ramp-up in violence, post Brexit, is being overplayed. The latest *Police Recorded Security Situation Statistics* report from the PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland) covering April 2017 to March 2018 offers some comfort as there were only two murders related to the security situation in the past year. To put this into perspective, the murder rate has reduced 39-fold in the 28 years covered by the report, in a time that the Good Friday (Belfast) and Stormont House agreements came into play, devolution materialised – with a NI Assembly up and running – and power-sharing by sworn enemies like Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness.

Paralleling a downward trend in terrorist incidents, there has been a major draw down of security force numbers and the dismantling of much of the counter terrorism infrastructure associated with the ‘Troubles’ – watchtowers, checkpoints, armoured vehicles, military helicopters – and the opening of unmarked roads and lanes across the border, which had been blocked off.

Sectionalism still exists, and on the terrorism front there is a number of extremists intent on creating instability with dissident republicans and trouble in Londonderry/Derry over the summer being a case in point. Terrorist groups may use Brexit as an excuse to further their agenda directing violence at infrastructure.



Another potentially destabilising consequence of a harder Brexit is a renewed push by nationalists and republicans for a border poll. Interestingly, at the end of July it seemed that Sinn Féin’s new President, Mary Lou McDonald, was inclined to put this on the backburner given the disruption around Brexit and was quoted in *The Irish News* as saying: “It is not my preferred option that we deal with the issue of Irish unity in a climate that is unsteady or unstable or chaotic, in other words in the context of a crash Brexit or a very hard Brexit.” However, this was not well received by many SF supporters and she, subsequently, rowed back on holding off on a border poll, so a poll at the earliest opportunity is very much back on the party’s wish list.

Given the uncertainty in the air, we have already seen the Police Service of Northern Ireland take steps to put on hold the sale of three police stations that it was planning to dispose of. The chief constable of the PSNI, George Hamilton, when giving evidence in the House of Commons to the Northern Ireland Affairs committee on 27 June, underscored the challenges and his frustration regarding who to turn to, so decisions could be made on additional officers: “Trying to find the appropriate authority within the system who is taking responsibility for coordinating the response to Brexit as it relates to the border between the EU and the UK or the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is challenging.”

Looking ahead, it has to be hoped that whatever shape Brexit finally materialises into, calm heads will prevail and that it does not cause issues for the security forces in Northern Ireland or the wider peace process, and crucially, if there is an upsurge in violence the right level of resources are in place to deal with this eventuality ●

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