

# European leaders confront Boris Johnson over failure to implement NI protocol

Dublin worries EU-UK diplomatic clash could inflame tensions in the North.



Boris Johnson speaks during a news conference on the final day of the G7 summit in the UK. Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA/Bloomberg

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British prime minister Boris Johnson has said he will do “whatever it takes” to protect the territorial integrity of the UK after his dispute with the EU about implementing the Northern Ireland protocol overshadowed a summit of world leaders in Cornwall.

Mr. Johnson and British foreign secretary Dominic Raab claimed that European leaders at the G7 summit questioned the North’s position as part of the UK.

The prime minister said he would not hesitate to suspend the protocol by triggering article 16 if the EU does not agree to implement the agreement in a way that is less intrusive in terms of checks on goods crossing the Irish Sea from Britain to the North.

“Of course we make the point continuously we are part of one great, indivisible United Kingdom, ” he told a press conference at the end of the G7 summit.

“What I am saying is that we will do whatever it takes to protect the territorial integrity of the UK.”

In a series of meetings on Saturday, French President Emmanuel Macron, German chancellor Angela Merkel, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen and European Council president Charles Michel confronted Mr Johnson over his failure to implement the protocol, a part of the EU-UK Brexit withdrawal agreement that gives the North a special post-Brexit trading status.

They warned him that further unilateral action by Britain on the protocol could trigger retaliatory action and urged him to dial down the rhetoric about the dispute.

Downing Street briefed journalists that when Mr Johnson asked Mr Macron how he would feel if sausages from Toulouse could not move freely to Paris, the French president said it was not comparable with the Northern Ireland situation because both cities were in the same country.

“We have serially seen senior EU figures talk about Northern Ireland as if it was some kind of different country to the UK. It is not only offensive, it has real-world effects on the communities in Northern Ireland, creates great concern, great consternation,” Mr. Raab told Sky News.

## **Fulfil obligations**

Mr. Macron said after the summit that Britain should fulfil the obligations it signed up to 18 months ago when it agreed to the protocol as part of the Brexit withdrawal agreement.

“My wish, my will is that we succeed – we succeed collectively – to put into operation what we decided upon a few months ago,” he said.

“I’m doing things very calmly. I believe that as far as this subject matter is concerned everybody has got to come back to reason.”

Ministers and officials in Dublin are worried that the diplomatic clash over the protocol could inflame tensions in the North and threaten the power-sharing institutions at Stormont, where Sinn Féin and the DUP are already at loggerheads amid a need to nominate a new first and deputy first minister when Arlene Foster steps down imminently.

Speaking to Sky News, Taoiseach Micheál Martin said a breakthrough between the EU and UK was still possible “if there’s a will there on both sides”. While calling for compromise on both sides, Mr. Martin also expressed the EU’s frustration with the British approach to the protocol.

“If there’s consistent, unilateral deviation from that agreement, that clearly undermines the broader relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom, which is in nobody’s interest and therefore that’s why the UK with the

EU have to work very hard now in the coming weeks," he said.

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