

Version

The go-to analogy when looking at the latest stage of the Brexit mess is three-dimensional chess, with multiple boards being played simultaneously: to understand Boris Johnson's predicament, you need to grasp the complex and contradictory trade-offs inherent in keeping power at home while managing international negotiations abroad.

Parliament has boxed the prime minister in. He faces a stark choice: break the law; request an extension from the EU he has vowed never to request; resign; or attempt to secure a Brexit deal.

Yet in any attempt to pass a deal, Johnson might be sowing the seeds of his own political demise. Enter the chessboard. He must not only come up with a plan that is acceptable to the EU – he also has to be confident that whatever deal he does could command majority support in parliament. This looks unlikely. It defies belief that Labour MPs who refused to vote for May's deal, because it heralded a Brexit far harder than they were willing to tolerate, would now support a more extreme version proposed by Johnson.

Every move he makes from here can be seized on by Farage, whose relative quiet in recent weeks has been the sound of a man biding his time. He believes passing a revised version of the existing withdrawal deal would be "a surrender act". The revolution, as ever, eats its own.

Besides, the EU realises that the prime minister will struggle to get a deal through parliament. And it knows an election is in the offing. Hence, its incentive to compromise is now, well, compromised.

Johnson could still stage a dramatic walkout from the European council, arguing that the EU has been unreasonable, then attack the "remainder parliament" that has stymied the "will of the people" – with all that could entail. Perhaps high-stakes poker might be a better metaphor.

Anand Menon and Alan Wager, *The Guardian*, September 30th, 2019