

Johnson says he hopes Trump's Mexico tariff threat just a leverage tactic

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U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson says he hopes President Trump's threat to impose tariffs on Mexican goods over illegal immigration is a just tactic to gain leverage over Mexico and Democrats in reaching a solution. But he warned new tariffs could complicate trade agreement talks if they go into effect.

Speaking at a WisPolitics.com/Milwaukee Press Club luncheon in Milwaukee May 31, the Oshkosh Republican said the president raised the issue with him last Thursday during a meeting on Ukraine.

"My first reaction was, if you use it as leverage to get agreement either with Mexico or Democrats to solve the problem, I'll consider it," Johnson said.

But he noted the president is aware of his view that tariffs are a tax on U.S. consumers and "long-term, I'm not a supporter of tariffs."

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He added later that along with existing tariffs on aluminum and steel, new tariffs would put reaching a new U.S.-Mexico-Canada trade agreement at risk.

"Hopefully they never get put in place," Johnson said. "Hopefully Mexico stands up and steps up to the plate and starts enacting real policy to stem the flow."

He noted the Mexican foreign minister came to Washington, D.C. today to discuss the issue.

"It's obviously gotten their attention," Johnson said.

Also during the luncheon, Johnson described a pilot plan that he is working on with a bipartisan group of lawmakers that would allow those coming from Central America who clearly don't have valid asylum claims to be quickly flown back home.

He said the aim of the plan, dubbed "Operation Safe Return," is to deter those seeking to come to the U.S. for economic reasons, which puts them at risk of exploitation by human traffickers and can cost migrants as much as a year's pay.

Johnson also said he spoke with the Mexican ambassador and foreign minister several weeks ago and asked them to enter an agreement with the U.S. so those seeking asylum from Central America could remain in Mexico, or be placed there after entering the U.S.

"That would be a huge deterrent," Johnson said. "The bottom line is if you're really fleeing danger, seeking asylum, you should be seeking the first country which is safe, and that would be Mexico."

But Johnson also acknowledged Americans' "insatiable appetite for drugs" has contributed to the influx in illegal immigration and that the manufacturing and dairy industries rely on immigrant labor to meet production demands.

"We have a shortage of labor, but it has to be a legal process," Johnson said.

Also during the luncheon, Johnson discussed: the Mueller report and investigations into Russian interference in the 2016 election; the GOP tax cuts, which he said have largely paid for themselves when state revenue increases are taken into account; the national debt; health care; and the future of the Republican Party in Wisconsin.

Listen to the audio:

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