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Peter Roff talks about America

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Trade Wars, Taxes & The Trump Agenda

By

Peter Roff



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The White House announced Monday the President Donald Trump's intention to welcome Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to his home at Mar-a-Lago for a third summit. The meeting, which most observers expect will focus on trade and the continuing North Korean crisis, signals the relationship between the two countries – and the two men – is growing stronger.

For the American president this is a good thing because, candidly, he needs all the friends he can get right now. His disruptive, undisciplined approach to governing has most of Washington in a state of continued chaos which prevents things from getting done. At least that's the official line coming from the establishment – or as Trump and his allies call it, “the swamp.”

If the election of 2016 was about anything it was about changing the direction of the country. Most all the public survey data indicated strong support for the idea America was, as the pollsters put it “on the wrong track” in the closing days of Barack Obama's presidency. Only a quarter of the country said things were headed “in the right direction” which, as Hillary Clinton discovered too late for her own good, was a hidden liability handicapping the Democrats' hope of retaining control of the White House or winning back Congress.

The wrong track number is down considerably from where it was for Obama at the end but is still higher than those who think things are getting better. Rasmussen Reports, a polling firm that some deride as being overly sympathetic to Republicans, just this week has Trump besting the 50 percent approval mark for the first time in his presidency. The economy is picking up, thanks to Trump's deregulatory policies and the historic tax cuts passed by Congress, but that's a double-edged sword the president and his party seem ill prepared to deal with.

While the Republicans run around the country claiming credit for the tax bill and trying to impress on the voters the benefits it will bring them in the next tax year – as well as reinforcing the benefits it has already created including raises, bonus payments, reductions in the cost of electricity and other developments corporate America has specifically tied to the tax cuts – the Democrats are generally playing the waiting game. To them Trump is not just unpopular, he's toxic and has poisoned the GOP's hope of keeping control of the U.S. House of Representatives as well as governorships and state

legislative chambers the Republicans took from the Democrats over the course of Obama's eight years in office.

They may be right. The Democrats recently won by the narrowest of margins a special election for a Republican-held congressional seat in Pennsylvania that Trump carried by 20 points in 2016. They've also won nearly 40 elections for Republican-held state legislative seats, many of which are deep in Trump territory. The off-off-year 2017 elections in Virginia and New York and New Jersey also failed to produce anything but good news for the party of Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer. The big blue wave said to be building because of the ways Trump is agitating the political process may be big enough to sweep the Republicans out next November.

Then again it may not. It's one thing to win special elections, even those held deep inside the opposition's territory. It's another thing all together to do it in a national election with so many seats up for grabs, resources being somewhat limited even in a time post the United States Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United* which opened the floodgates in both parties to money not previously accessible to either.

It's clear the Democrats have figured out how to increase turnout in these special elections to presidential levels – presidential elections typically being the ones in which voter turnout is at its highest levels. The Republicans have failed to match these efforts, possibly because it still has not set in they need to do it. Privately, GOP congressional leaders are encouraging all their members – even those who are sitting in what are considered to be safe seats – to run scared. This is especially true of those incumbents who won re-election in 2016 while Clinton got more votes for president than Trump.

Taken together with the seats in states forced by courts to redraw district lines like Pennsylvania and North Carolina in advance of the next election there is enough in play to flip the House. Democrats are counting on it, especially because they believe upper income, college educated, white professional women who typically vote Republican are looking for a way to express their anger at what they perceive to be the president's mistreatment of women in his private gone public life.

Surprisingly Trump's misstep on trade – his tariffs on imported steel and aluminum may be popular with working class Americans who believe they matter but they're a bust as far as the pro-free market forces in his coalition are concerned – probably won't hurt him

all that much. The protectionist strain is strong in the populist American hinterlands so, among voters that care, it's as likely to be a plus in as much of the country as it is a minus and, also for those who care and think it the wrong thing to do the Democrats could only be worse.

What is really hurting the Republicans is the lack of an agenda worth voting for. Both congressional chambers are centers of inactivity – and for reasons that have little to do with the 60-vote threshold required these days to pass legislation through the U.S. Senate. As the economy improves voters are increasingly voicing concern about education, the continued rise in the cost of health care and, after the mass shooting at a Florida high school, the need to make schools safer by making it harder to get guns.

The final point, incidentally, is an elite position not held by most of America but, because of the ferocity with which it is being driven home by the national media, one that is finding a receptive audience among precisely the kind of Republicans who didn't like Trump to begin with and who, if they indeed did pull the lever for him once are reluctant to do so again.

As strange as it sounds the Republican Party – once the home to the most innovating public policy thinking in the U.S. political arena – may have run out of ideas. House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell have ceased to be bold in their thinking. The recent Omnibus appropriations bill that funding the federal government for the remainder of the fiscal year is a nightmare of new and increased spending which, for the good of the party's future Trump probably would have vetoed even if it did produce a temporary government shutdown.

The Democrats don't have any new ideas of their own and are already promising to raise taxes which, when coupled with their implied threat to start taking guns away from people just might do enough to get Republican to the polls to mitigate what most analysts are cautiously projecting will be a Democratic sweep in November. If they do win it all or even most of it, however, it will be by default. The swamp dwellers on either side of the aisle don't have a plan to make American better let alone “great again.” That remains, for the moment anyway, the singular province of the president. He is still setting the agenda.

- Peter Roff is a visiting research scholar at Asian Forum Japan(AFJ). Mr. Roff writes for a variety of U.S. news outlets and is commentator on cable television and radio.