



Morning Alert - Tuesday, February 21, 2017

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HEADLINES

Morning news

All TV networks led with follow-up reports on the murder of Kim Jong Nam, with NHK reporting that North Korea has denied that the man who was murdered at an airport in Malaysia is Kim Jong Nam.

Major front-page items in national papers included a report that representatives of all major political parties expressed support yesterday for the Emperor's abdication, a Cabinet Office plan to allow more foreign experts to work in special economic zones, and an update on the assassination of Kim Jong Nam.

INTERNATIONAL

GOJ less wary of Trump administration, but concerns linger

All weekend papers carried extensive reports on President Trump's first month in office, during which the President issued a number of executive orders. Asahi said while the administration still appears to be in disarray, avid Trump supporters welcome the President's attempts to bring down the establishment. Nikkei wrote that following the bilateral summit on Feb. 10, the Japanese government is less wary of the new administration since the two sides were able to reaffirm the strong bilateral alliance and U.S. security commitment to the region. The paper added, however, that although Tokyo's concerns about security were dispelled, uncertainties remain over trade and currency exchange policies. Yomiuri wrote that trade issues will have to be dealt with at future minister-level meetings, adding that the President's policies on Russia and China remain unclear. The paper said the GOJ will continue to closely monitor the President's remarks and actions.

Abe meets with U.S members of Congress

Several papers reported this morning that Prime Minister Abe received a courtesy call from a visiting U.S. congressional delegation on Monday. The members reportedly called Abe's recent visit to the U.S. a "major success." In reply, the premier said: "The U.S. and Japan are allies that share universal values. Parliamentary exchange is important."

Secretary Tillerson stresses that U.S. still attaches importance to Asia

Saturday morning's Nikkei reported on the first meeting between Secretary of State Tillerson and his Chinese counterpart Wang on Friday in Germany, during which he called on China to step up its pressure on North Korea. The paper wrote that Tillerson's remarks signify that the U.S. continues to attach importance to Asia, adding that the Secretary also hinted that the U.S. may take issue with China's currency and trade policies if it continues to take a passive stance on North Korea. The paper said the Secretary focused on North Korea during his first meeting with Wang because he thinks China is escalating the crisis in Northeast Asia by continuing to oppose effective sanctions on the North. In a related article the daily noted that the Secretary expressed a negative view about military cooperation with Russia during a foreign ministers' meeting on Syria.

China announces suspension of coal imports from North Korea

All Sunday morning papers reported that the Chinese Commerce Ministry announced on Saturday that it will suspend the import of coal from North Korea from Feb. 19 to the end of this year as part of the UNSC's sanctions resolutions that were adopted following North Korea's nuclear tests. Asahi wrote that since coal exports to China have been an important means for North Korea to obtain foreign currency, the announcement is likely to deal a heavy blow to the nation. Nikkei wrote that since China has been insisting that the U.S. needs to hold direct talks with North Korea in order to resolve the North Korean nuclear and missile issues, it is likely to urge the Trump administration to take more active steps. The paper said while China is hoping to pave the way for the resumption of the Six-Party Talks, the outlook remains uncertain.

Monday's Yomiuri reported that Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Hagiuda appeared on a Fuji TV program on Sunday and welcomed China's announcement. He said: "This should have been done ages ago. We welcome China's decision." Referring to North Korea's ballistic missile launch on Feb. 12, Hagiuda also reportedly stressed the need to remind North Korea that its reckless behavior only isolates it in the international community.

Kishida calls on China to implement UNSC sanctions against North Korea

Saturday morning's Sankei front-paged a report on a meeting between Foreign Minister Kishida and his Chinese counterpart Wang in Bonn, Germany, on Friday, during which Kishida urged China to "act responsibly as a permanent member of the UNSC" in response to North Korea's ballistic missile launch on Feb. 12 and to thoroughly implement the UNSC resolutions. The paper said this was the first meeting between the two ministers since they met in Tokyo last August. Kishida also reportedly

expressed concern about China's unilateral actions in the East and South China Seas. Regarding Taiwan, Kishida reiterated Japan's position of only recognizing China as a legal government. Wang reportedly referred to the 45th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic ties between China and Japan, and said: "The bilateral relationship has been blessed with opportunities to improve but at the same time is facing challenges that cannot be ignored."

Japan to postpone trilateral summit with China, South Korea

Sunday morning's Yomiuri reported on the likelihood that a trilateral summit between Japan, China, and South Korea that Japan is planning to host will be postponed for the time being due to the lack of momentum for dialogue in light of the ongoing domestic political confusion in South Korea as well as strained relations between Japan and South Korea over the issue of comfort women statues and China and South Korea over the deployment of a THAAD system. The paper wrote that if South Korean President Park is dismissed, the trilateral summit is likely to be postponed until after the South Korean presidential election, which is expected to be held at the end of April at the earliest.

ROK minister says comfort woman statue in Busan "not appropriate"

Saturday morning's Yomiuri carried a report on its front page on a meeting between Foreign Minister Kishida and his South Korean counterpart Yun in Bonn, Germany, on Friday. Kishida reportedly said the installation of a comfort woman statue in front of the Japanese Consulate General in Busan is "extremely regrettable" based on the position that it goes against the 2015 agreement that confirmed the "final and irreversible" resolution of the comfort women issue. Minister Yun reportedly said in response: "Installing the statue in front of a foreign diplomatic office is not appropriate in terms of diplomatic protocol. We will make utmost efforts (to resolve the issue)." The paper said, however, that Kishida failed to obtain any assurance from Yun that the statue will be removed. Saturday morning's Sankei carried a similar story.

Seoul city assembly adopts resolution calling for renegotiation of comfort women pact

Sunday morning's Asahi reported that the Seoul City Assembly adopted a resolution on Friday calling for the renegotiation of the Japan-ROK agreement reached in December 2015 on the comfort women issue. The paper said the resolution also calls for the disbandment of the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation and the return of the one billion yen that was paid to the foundation by the Japanese government. The paper said the city assembly is planning to send the resolution to the Blue House as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Diet.

USS Carl Vinson patrols South China Sea

Most Monday morning papers reported that the U.S. Navy's Carrier Strike Group 1, which includes the nuclear aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson, began operations in the South China Sea on Saturday. Sankei wrote that although the Navy has referred to the deployment as "routine operations," it is

apparently aimed at keeping China in check in view of its militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea and demonstrating the U.S. military's involvement in the Asia-Pacific region.

Japan, Russia to hold “2+2” meeting next month in Tokyo

Saturday morning's Yomiuri reported on a meeting between Foreign Minister Kishida and his Russian counterpart Lavrov on Friday in Bonn, Germany, during which they agreed to hold a “2+2” meeting by foreign and defense ministers on Mar. 20 in Tokyo. The paper said the two nations had not held such a meeting since the first meeting in November 2013 due to the Ukrainian issue, adding, however, that Prime Minister Abe expressed a certain degree of understanding toward a proposal by President Putin to resume the talks during their summit meeting held last December. The paper said Kishida and Lavrov also agreed to hold a vice-ministerial meeting on Mar. 18 in Tokyo to discuss joint economic activities on the Northern Territories. The daily added that Vice Foreign Minister Sugiyama and Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Titov will also meet in Tokyo on March 30 for strategic dialogue.

SECURITY

LDP's Komura willing to study possibility of allowing SDF to attack enemy bases

Most Monday papers reported that LDP Vice President Komura expressed on an NHK program on Sunday his willingness to consider whether to allow SDF troops to attack enemy bases before Japan is attacked by a missile. Sankei quoted him as saying: “There have been discussions on the SDF possessing such equipment. We can at least consider whether we should begin a detailed study.” Nippon Ishin (Japan Innovation Party) co-leader Katayama echoed Komura's view by saying: “There are various constitutional issues with attacking enemy bases, but we could at least study it.” Katayama also reportedly said that starting such a study could put pressure on North Korea over its nuclear and missile development programs. Komeito Party leader Yamaguchi said: “Only the United States has the capability to attack enemy bases. Since there is no plan to carry out a detailed study on the attack capability, it is important to improve division of labor with the United States in order to build up a missile defense system suitable for Japan.” JCP leader Shii expressed opposition to the idea.

SDF conducts first overseas drill for rescuing Japanese nationals

Several Monday morning papers reported that the SDF held its first overseas drill for evacuating Japanese nationals at a Thai military base in Thailand together with the U.S., Thai, and Malaysian forces. The drill was disclosed to the media on Sunday. SDF members are now allowed to evacuate Japanese nationals under the new security legislation that took effect last year.

POLITICS

MOD chief being put “on the defensive”

Tuesday's Asahi reported that Defense Minister Inada is struggling to exercise leadership within the ministry, as she has been put on the defensive at the parliament in the face of strong criticism from the opposition for her failure to present a credible explanation for the discovery of daily reports on the security situation in South Sudan kept by a GSDF unit engaged in peacekeeping operations there. The reports were initially believed to have been destroyed. Inada has also been grilled by opposition lawmakers over the use of the term “combat” in the reports. According to the paper, the minister is at odds with some ministry officials who have qualms about her “hawkish” ideology as seen in her controversial visit to Yasukuni Shrine last December.

OPINION POLLS

Public support for Abe cabinet rises to 66%

Monday morning's Yomiuri reported on the results of its opinion poll conducted over the weekend, which showed that public approval for the Abe cabinet rose 5 points from last month to 66%, and nonsupport dropped 5 points to 24%. The paper said the heightened sense of crisis over North Korea's missile launch in addition to the outcome of the U.S.-Japan summit contributed to the rise in the approval rating. When asked whether the international community should use “pressure” or “dialogue” to stop North Korea from launching ballistic missiles, 55% chose pressure, while 35% favored dialogue. Regarding the U.S.-Japan summit, 66% welcomed it and 26% did not. When asked about the confirmation at the U.S.-Japan summit that the Senkakus fall under the scope of the Security Treaty, 71% welcomed it. On the new bilateral economic dialogue, 40% said it will not have any major impact on the Japanese economy, 21% said it will have a positive impact, and 20% said it will have a negative impact. On the future of U.S.-Japan relations, 45% said they have more anxiety than hope, a significant drop from the 70% recorded in the last survey. When asked about the Trump administration's effect on global peace and stability, 64% said it will be more negative than positive. In terms of party support, 43% of respondents expressed support for the LDP, while 6% backed the Democratic Party.

Today's Asahi front-paged the results of its latest public opinion poll that found some 54% approved of the recent summit between President Trump and Prime Minister Abe, while 27% disapproved of it. About 54% said the agreed-upon launch of an economic dialogue will not have any effect on bilateral economic relations.

Sankei also published the results of its opinion survey showing that 64% approved of the prime minister's performance in the summit. As only about 25% predicted that U.S.-Japan relations will deteriorate, down more than 35% from three weeks ago, the paper speculated that the Japanese people have become less pessimistic about the prospects for the bilateral ties perhaps because

President Trump did not bring up the host nation support issue and confirmed the U.S. commitment to the defense of the Senkakus.

ECONOMY

U.S.-Japan economic dialogue to start as early as April

All papers reported Saturday that Finance Minister Aso spoke to reporters on Friday about the new bilateral economic dialogue with Vice President Pence, saying, "We will first begin comprehensive discussions as early as around April." Aso reportedly disclosed that bilateral cooperation in infrastructure investment as well as trade and investment rules will be on the agenda. Aso also indicated that Tokyo is hoping to prioritize economic cooperation over a free trade agreement, since it will be less contentious. Yomiuri wrote that although Japan is planning to seek ways to cooperate with the U.S., the outlook remains uncertain because the U.S. might make difficult demands.

Monday's Mainichi reported that in its latest survey, 67% of respondents said Japan will not be able to negotiate on equal terms with the U.S. under the new economic dialogue, while 21% said it will. The paper said although President Trump did not make any economic requests during his summit with Prime Minister Abe, there are growing concerns about possible U.S. pressure on Japan in the future.

TEPCO and Chubu Electric to integrate thermal power generation businesses

Monday morning's Asahi front-paged a report that Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings Inc. and Chubu Electric Power Co are making final arrangements to integrate their thermal power generation businesses in FY2018 and are likely to sign a basic agreement in around spring. The paper wrote that the two utilities established a joint company called JERA in 2015, adding that it already generates fuel using thermal power and manages the companies' thermal power business overseas. The paper said they are now considering shifting their domestic thermal power operations to JERA. The daily wrote that if realized, the joint company is expected to have 40% of the market share of Japan's thermal power generation.

Toshiba to withdraw from nuclear power project in Texas

Monday morning's Nikkei front-paged a report that Toshiba Corp. is expected to effectively withdraw from a project to build two nuclear reactors at a U.S. nuclear power plant in Texas, saying that this is the first time for the company to pull out of an overseas project since it became apparent that it will post a massive loss in the nuclear power business in the U.S. The paper said although Toshiba joined the project in 2008 to export its advanced boiling water reactors for the first time, it decided that it would be difficult to continue the project under its current business situation.

