



Morning Alert - Friday, March 17, 2017

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HEADLINES

Morning news

All networks gave top play to reports that the Diet will summon Moritomo Gakuen President Kagoike to testify at the Diet on March 23, adding that Kagoike told reporters that he received 1 million yen in donations from Prime Minister Abe.

Main front-page stories in national papers included Secretary of State Tillerson's meetings with Prime Minister Abe and Foreign Minister Kishida on Thursday, the Diet's plan to summon Moritomo Gakuen President Kagoike, and the latest scandal engulfing the Defense Ministry in which internal documents reported as "destroyed" were actually retained by the GSDF.

INTERNATIONAL

Secretary Tillerson visits Tokyo; U.S., Japan agree to strengthen pressure on DPRK

All papers gave front or inside-page play to Secretary of State Tillerson's separate meetings with Prime Minister Abe and Foreign Minister Kishida, during which they agreed to ratchet up the pressure on North Korea to deter its nuclear and missile development and coordinate closely to incorporate Japanese input into the ongoing review of U.S. policy toward Pyongyang. The Secretary commented on the policy review by saying to the premier, "All options are on the table." In a press conference held after the session with Kishida, the Secretary stated: "The efforts of the past 20 years to bring North Korea to a point of denuclearization have failed. So we have 20 years of failed approach.... In the face of this ever-escalating threat, it is clear that a different approach is required."

The two sides also discussed China's maritime advancement, Japan's relations with Russia, and the comfort women dispute between Japan and South Korea. The Secretary and the Japanese officials agreed on the importance of enhancing U.S. engagement in order to counter China's militarization of the South China Sea. Abe called for U.S. understanding for his efforts to improve ties with Moscow in order to resolve the Northern Territories dispute. On the 2015 comfort women accord between Seoul and Tokyo, the Secretary told the press: "The U.S. maintains its support [for the pact]. We encourage both sides to approach that agreement in earnest." Secretary Tillerson and Foreign Minister Kishida also agreed to continue coordination for convening a bilateral 2+2 foreign and defense ministerial meeting at an early date.

Trump administration to take hard line

Asahi wrote that by describing the U.S.'s North Korea policy of the past two decades, including the 1994 Agreed Framework, the Six-Party Talks, and the Obama administration's "strategic patience," as a "failure," Secretary Tillerson hinted at the possibility that the Trump administration is set to take a hard line, possibly including the use of military force. Sankei said the Japanese side welcomed the possibility of the Trump administration taking a confrontational approach toward the Kim regime, quoting Abe as telling his associates afterward: "[My meeting with the Secretary] was good. I think the U.S.-Japan alliance has entered a new stage." Mainichi wrote that if the Trump administration indeed takes a hard line toward North Korea, regional tension may rise because China and Russia are bound to react strongly. The daily projected that under such a scenario, Washington may ask Tokyo to shoulder a greater security burden, quoting the Secretary as saying in the press event: "While the security environment in this region can be challenging, the United States is committed to strengthening our role, and we welcome an increased Japanese commitment to their roles and responsibilities."

Yomiuri said that both Abe and Kishida were desperate to elicit assurances from the Secretary that the Trump administration will take Japanese input into consideration when formulating a "different approach" toward North Korea since some GOJ officials are afraid that Tokyo may be "sidelined" if Washington chooses to hold direct dialogue with Pyongyang. The Japanese side was relieved that the Secretary agreed with the premier on the "importance on sharing strategic goals." The daily added that the Abe administration is hopeful that the Trump administration will uphold its predecessor's policy of playing the role of an arbitrator between Tokyo and Seoul over the comfort women issue, given that smooth ties between the two Asian partners, which are critical to dealing with North Korea's provocations, may be jeopardized amid speculation that anti-Japanese sentiment could escalate in South Korea in the run-up to the presidential election in May.

Secretary Tillerson makes de-facto media debut

Yomiuri wrote that the joint press availability with Kishida was the first time for Secretary Tillerson to take questions from media representatives, noting that he apparently handled the press corps relatively smoothly. Sankei claimed the Secretary was able to convey “important messages through concise statements,” noting that his discourse marked a sharp contrast to former Secretary Clinton, who is known for her eloquence. However, Mainichi wrote that U.S. reporters are still critical of Secretary Tillerson’s unresponsiveness to questions from the media, speculating that he may be trying to maintain a “low profile” on the public relations front to avoid revealing any foreign policy “inconsistencies” with the White House.

POLITICS

Inada in tight spot amid new allegations of data concealment by GSDF

All papers reported that upon instructions from Defense Minister Inada, the Office of Inspector General at the Defense Ministry on Thursday launched an investigation into the latest allegation that the GSDF had retained “daily reports” filed by a GSDF battalion deployed in South Sudan on UN peacekeeping operations even though the ministry said at one point last December that those records had already been “deleted.” According to the papers, a senior official of the ministry’s Joint Staff Office instructed the GSDF to conceal the fact that the records in question were retained probably in an attempt to head off criticism that the existence of the documents, if revealed, would contradict the ministry’s explanations that they had already been destroyed. GSDF Chief of Staff Gen. Okabe was reportedly aware of the existence.

The dailies said the concealment scandal has renewed doubts about the caliber of Defense Minister Inada, who has been relentlessly grilled at the Diet by the opposition about her ties with the scandal-hit Moritomo Gauken, since the latest finding flew in the face of Inada’s repeated statements at the parliament that she maintains firm control over the ministry. Based on the results of a month-long ministry probe she initiated, Inada had stressed that no offices except the Joint Staff Office had retained the daily reports. Yomiuri wrote some MOD officials have been skeptical about the leadership of the minister, who visited Yasukuni Shrine right after she accompanied Prime Minister Abe to Pearl Harbor in December despite objections from within the ministry.

Asahi wrote that Inada decided to launch a probe right after NHK landed a scoop about the concealment on Wednesday evening with the goal of displaying that she is “firmly in control.” The paper said, however, that the ministry has been in disarray since the GSDF report scandal came to light in January.

Mainichi noted that Abe and the Kantei appear determined to defend Inada, quoting Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga as saying that there is no chance of Inada being dismissed. The Kantei is taking the concealment scandal very seriously as it undermines the civilian control of the military.

Moritomo Gakuen president to testify before Diet

All papers reported on an agreement forged between the ruling and the opposition blocs to summon President Kagoike of scandal-hit Moritomo Gakuen to testify at the parliament on March 23 to provide sworn testimony in order to clarify his relationship with Prime Minister Abe and his wife Akie and the substantial discount that the school operator obtained when purchasing state-owned property for opening an elementary school. The ruling side suddenly shifted gear yesterday to summon Kagoike in response to his latest assertion that the premier gave him a donation of 1 million yen via Mrs. Abe in September 2015 to help him launch the school. Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga dismissed this claim categorically last night.

ECONOMY

Secretary Ross, Minister Seko agree to strengthen economic relations

NHK reported this morning that visiting Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Seko met with Secretary of Commerce Ross on Thursday in Washington. The network said the two ministers agreed to boost bilateral economic relations through creating rules for trade and investment in the Asia-Pacific region. The network said no specific requests were made at the meeting between Ross and Seko despite the fact that members of the Trump administration have recently been making tough remarks toward Japan, including President Trump urging senior officials of Toyota on Wednesday to build factories in the U.S. and USTR nominee Lighthizer expressing the view that Japan should be urged to review its tariffs on agricultural products. The network said, however, that since the U.S. side may urge Japan to take measures to reduce the U.S. trade deficit with Japan during the economic dialogue in April, Minister Seko is hoping to forge a good relationship with Secretary Ross, who is known to be pro-Japan. The network also said Secretary Ross talked about Toshiba and stressed the importance of stable management, adding that the two ministers agreed to closely share information on the matter.

Japanese automakers troubled by President Trump's latest remarks on Toyota

Mainichi reported that President Trump's remarks in Detroit on Wednesday calling for Toyota and rival automakers to build plants in the U.S. has caused a stir in the Japanese auto industry, noting that local auto executives who had been relieved by the fact that Prime Minister Abe forged a good rapport with the President during his trip to the U.S. in February, are afraid that the U.S. leader may once again put pressure on them to invest more in America.



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