



Morning Alert - Tuesday, August 22, 2017

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HEADLINES

Morning news

NHK gave top play to a report that a fire broke out in an apartment in Akita Prefecture early this morning, killing three people and injuring ten others. NTV, Fuji TV, and TV Asahi led with reports on the full eclipse observed across the U.S. on Monday. TBS gave top play to the start of the joint U.S.-ROK military exercise Ulchi-Freedom Guardian.

Major front-page stories in national dailies included the Democratic Party presidential election and updates on the recent terrorist attack in Barcelona.

SECURITY

USN orders safety stand-down in response to latest collision involving Yokosuka destroyer

All Tuesday papers reported on the collision between the USS McCain and a Liberian-flagged tanker off Singapore on Monday morning, saying that the Chief of Naval Operations, Adm. Richardson, ordered a rare operational pause across the entire U.S. Navy to ensure safety training and maintenance of the vessels given that this was the second serious mishap involving the Navy's 7th Fleet in two months following the collision of the USS Fitzgerald in late June. The pause is a one-day safety stand-down.

Japan worried McCain mishap may degrade anti-DPRK operations

Yomiuri said Japanese defense officials are alarmed by the collision involving the McCain given that 7th fleet warships have been mobilized heavily for monitoring possible North Korean ballistic missile launches in coordination with the MSDF. According to the article, two of the seven Yokosuka-based destroyers equipped with anti-missile radar are no longer available for an extended period. MOD officials expressed qualms about the possible emergence of a “loophole” in the joint early/warning and surveillance mission against North Korea.

Nikkei said the 7th fleet has taken on greater responsibilities due to China’s militarization of the South China Sea and North Korea’s ceaseless provocations, speculating that the U.S. Navy in the Pacific may be “exhausted” from the excessive workload. The daily expressed concern about a possible decline in the U.S. naval presence in East Asia, wondering if Beijing, Pyongyang, and Moscow are perhaps pleased with the USN’s “unforced errors.”

Defense budget sequestration impairs Navy readiness

Sankei said the latest incident was the fourth mishap this year involving Yokosuka-based Navy ships, noting that some U.S. experts, including Sen. McCain, have insisted that drastic cuts in the defense budget under the previous Obama administration have crippled the Navy’s operational readiness. While President Trump plans to commit hefty spending to revive a “strong navy,” the paper said it may take some time before the Navy will actually be able to rebuild a robust fleet due in part to the tight ship construction schedule.

MOD to base Ospreys at existing GSDF facility in lieu of Saga Airport

Most papers reported that the Defense Ministry is looking into deploying five GSDF Ospreys to be introduced from the U.S. starting next fall at a GSDF camp, potentially in Chiba, Nagasaki, or Kumamoto, temporarily because its present plan of basing them semi-permanently at Saga Airport has stalled due to local opposition. According to the stories, as communities around the candidate sites may also take issue with temporary basing of the tilt-rotor planes, the ministry may be forced to ask the U.S. side to retain the Japanese aircraft until a location can be formally selected. But the ministry has no plans to abandon the Saga initiative. Defense Minister Onodera said last night: “We would like to move forward with the Saga plan as fast as possible.... There are various scenarios, such as honing the readiness of the Osprey [pilots] by conducting training in the U.S. or finding locations [to base them] in various parts of Japan.”

Ospreys conduct nighttime training in Hokkaido

Mainichi wrote that two Futenma-based Ospreys carried out training at an SDF exercise field in Hokkaido on Monday night as part of the ongoing U.S.-Japan exercise, saying that this was the first nighttime practice performed by the U.S. MV-22s in a bilateral exercise. The two aircraft flew from and returned to Misawa AB after conducting training for about an hour.

MOD taking a second look at Global Hawk procurement

Several papers reported that the Defense Ministry appears to be reviewing the planned introduction of three Global Hawk UAVs on account of the high cost, noting that the price tag is 20% higher than the initial estimate. Defense Minister Onodera, who is likely to make a final decision shortly, said on a TV show yesterday: "Since the Global Hawk has highly sophisticated early warning and surveillance capabilities, the ministry would like to procure the aircraft."

In a related story, Mainichi said the Japanese Communist Party disclosed yesterday that it has obtained copies of two sets of MOD documents drafted in June and July of this year describing internal deliberations on the sharp increase in the UAV's cost. The June document reportedly indicates that the ministry was inclined to cancel the procurement because of the availability of alternative platforms, while the July document says the acquisition of the spy drones is "indispensable" because no other defense hardware can fulfill the same function.

POLITICS

Edano, Maehara to seek DP helm

All papers reported extensively on the official kickoff on Monday of the Democratic Party presidential election campaign, noting that only former Foreign Minister Maehara and former Chief Cabinet Secretary Edano threw their hats into the ring. Maehara appears to be commanding more support than Edano among the 142 DP Diet members, whereas Edano is competing neck and neck in seeking support from rank and file party members and party legislators of local assemblies. Yomiuri speculates that Maehara is more popular than Edano among Diet members because some of them fear conservative-minded legislators may choose to break ranks if the liberal Edano prevails in the election. The outcome of the race to choose the next DP leader may trigger a major realignment of the opposition bloc.

According to the articles, one of the biggest campaign issues in the presidential race to be held on Sept. 1 will be whether or not the party should pursue cooperation with the Japanese Communist Party in the next general election. Edano insists that a tie-up with the communists would be effective in defeating the LDP. But Maehara disagrees, judging that core party supporters would be alienated by a "political marriage of convenience" between parties who strongly differ on such key issues as national defense and consumption tax.

Cabinet support recovers

Sankei front-paged the results of its latest nationwide public opinion survey that put support for the Abe administration at 43.8%, up 9.1 points from a month ago, and nonsupport at 49%, down 7.1 points. This was the first rise in the support rate in four months. Four out of five expressed doubts about the Democratic Party's ability to run the government.

INTERNATIONAL

DPRK reacts strongly to U.S.-ROK drill

All dailies took up yesterday's start of the U.S.-South Korea defense exercise "Ulchi-Freedom Guardian," highlighting the reaction voiced by the DPRK media outlet, which warned that the Kim regime "will not back away from its nuclear program one iota" as long as the U.S. remains hostile and practices "nuclear blackmail." As Defense Secretary Mattis reportedly dismissed speculation that the number of U.S. troops in this year's exercise was slashed by 30% from last year, the articles projected that Pyongyang may launch a ballistic missile or conduct a nuclear test in response.

Senior LDP official relays Japan's concern about Moon's remarks on forced labor

All papers reported from Seoul that former Finance Minister Nukaga met with South Korean President Moon on Monday and conveyed apprehension about the ROK leader's recent comment that Korean victims of forced labor during WWII are still entitled to compensation. According to the Japanese politician, Moon made no response and instead explained his administration's position on the bilateral comfort women pact. The president also expressed hope for holding discussions on bilateral history disputes based on the principle of developing a future-oriented bilateral relationship.

Kono to visit Africa

Yomiuri and Sankei reported that Foreign Minister Kono plans to visit Mozambique and Ethiopia from Wednesday through Sunday in order to take part in a Tokyo International Conference on African Development ministerial meeting to be held in Maputo.

ECONOMY

"TPP 11" to hold meeting in Australia next week

Sankei wrote that the chief negotiators of the 11 TPP member nations will assemble in Sydney next week to work out details for the early effectuation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership.