


JAPAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS

Morning Alert - Monday, September 25, 2017

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HEADLINES

Morning news

NHK gave top play to a report that Prime Minister Abe is expected to officially announce this evening his intention to dissolve the Lower House on Sept. 28. TBS and TV Asahi led with reports on a new party to be formed by an associate of Tokyo Governor Koike. NTV and Fuji TV led with reports that a panel fell off a KLM Royal Dutch Airlines plane in flight and hit a car in Osaka on Saturday, saying that there were no injuries.

Major front-page items in national dailies included the imminent launch of a new political party, the North Korean foreign minister's speech at the UN on Saturday, and the German national election on Sunday in which Chancellor Merkel appears to have clinched a fourth term.

POLITICS

Many Diet members to join new party launched by politicians close to Koike

All Monday papers reported extensively that as many as a dozen Diet members are likely to join a new party to be established by former Environment Minister Hosono and independent legislator Wakasa, who is close to Tokyo Governor Koike. On Sunday alone, three lawmakers, including State Minister of Cabinet Office Mineyuki Fukuda of the LDP, announced their intention to become founding members of the new group, which will probably be called "Party of Hope." Mainichi projected that the new party is likely to field candidates in almost all 58 single-seat constituencies in Tokyo, Kanagawa, and Saitama Prefectures, explaining that Hosono and Wakasa are hoping to capitalize on the popularity of Governor Koike in the metropolitan area to garner the support of centrist voters who are dissatisfied with the Abe cabinet. Sankei speculated that the new party will field as many as 150 candidates across the nation.

The papers said Koike has decided to get heavily involved in the launch of the new party in the belief that her participation is needed to dispel the impression that it primarily consists of DP defectors, which would be detrimental to attracting conservative voters. The governor may occupy a key party portfolio, such as “co-representative” or “senior party advisor.” According to Mainichi, the LDP is alarmed by the planned launch of the new opposition party, bracing for the possibility of many of its candidates being defeated like in the July Tokyo metropolitan assembly race. On the other hand, Yomiuri speculated that the establishment of the Koike-affiliated party may help the ruling coalition prevail in the general election given that although the ruling coalition will field only one candidate in each single-seat district, the votes of those critical of the Abe administration will be spread thinly because they will need to choose from among multiple opposition candidates.

LDP remains popular

Nikkei front-paged the results of its public opinion survey conducted over the weekend that showed some 44% chose the LDP as their preferred party for the upcoming general election while only 8% selected the Democratic Party. The new party to be launched by Hosono and Wakasa also commanded support from 8% of respondents. Support for the Abe administration stood at 50%, up 4 points from a month ago, while nonsupport was 42%, down 4 points. However, 56% said it is not appropriate for the premier to dissolve the Lower House for a snap election at this juncture. A poll taken by Kyodo showed that 27% said they would vote for the LDP in proportional representation, whereas 8% opted for the DP. Some 6% said they would support the new party.

Democratic Party decides on platform for general election

Most Saturday dailies wrote that the Democratic Party has drafted a platform for the upcoming general election in which it makes clear its disapproval of Prime Minister Abe’s intention to revise Article 9 of the Constitution to make the existence of the SDF explicit. It also calls for repealing the comprehensive security laws, calling them “unconstitutional.” Yomiuri said that in drafting the platform, Maehara apparently toned down his conservative line on such issues as constitutional amendment and national security out of deference to the party’s liberal wing.

In a related development, today’s Nikkei claimed that Maehara is considering merging the DP with the Liberal Party headed by Ichiro Ozawa prior to the general election on Oct. 22, noting that the nation’s largest labor union, Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengo), strongly supports the idea based on the belief that the consolidation of the two parties will be indispensable to counter the ruling coalition.

INTERNATIONAL

“War of words” raging between President Trump and North Korea

All weekend papers highlighted the harsh language being exchanged between President Trump and DPRK strongman Kim Jong Un, expressing concern that the heated rhetoric might end up triggering an inadvertent military conflict. According to the papers, the two leaders are trying to intimidate each

other by using such incendiary language as “rocket man,” “madman,” and “mentally deranged dotard.” The papers projected that the tension will probably continue to escalate since neither side is showing any sign of backing down. The USS Ronald Reagan is expected to be deployed off the Korean Peninsula in October and North Korea’s foreign minister has indicated that the DPRK might test a hydrogen bomb over the Pacific ahead of the 72th anniversary of the foundation of the DPRK Workers’ Party on Oct. 10.

Today’s papers stressed that the “mudslinging” continued over the weekend, taking up a speech delivered on Saturday by North Korean Foreign Minister Ri before the UN general assembly, in which he said Pyongyang’s ultimate goal is to establish a “balance of power with the U.S.” and that it is “inevitable” that his country will launch a missile toward the U.S. mainland in revenge for President Trump’s insults directed at Kim Jong Un. The U.S. leader shot back swiftly with the following tweet: “Just heard Foreign Minister of North Korea speak at U.N. If he echoes thoughts of Little Rocket Man, they won't be around much longer!”

Monday dailies also spotlighted the Pentagon’s announcement on Saturday that two B-1 bombers and fighter jets flew along North Korea’s eastern coastline in a predawn “show of force” that got closer to the DPRK border than any other mission this century. Sankei said the operation was perhaps intended to deter North Korea’s aggression, adding that since the strategic bombers are incapable of carrying nuclear weapons, the mission was also designed to show North Korea that Washington has no plan to initiate a preemptive strike.

U.S. strengthens economic sanctions on DPRK

All Saturday papers reported on the latest executive order signed by President Trump to tighten the noose around North Korea by imposing sanctions on third-country entities doing business with the defiant regime. According to the articles, the main targets of the secondary sanctions are Chinese businesses, which account for almost 90% of North Korea’s foreign trade. Asahi said the latest punitive measure is tantamount to “economic war” with Pyongyang, saying that it is Washington’s “trump card” for reining in North Korea given that military options appear to be impractical. The daily explained that the Trump administration took the step after learning that a similar approach succeeded in persuading Iran to give up on its nuclear ambitions by making it impossible for Tehran to collect revenue from petroleum exports.

In a related development, Saturday’s Mainichi and Sankei wrote that five major Chinese banks have already suspended transactions with DPRK entities and individuals apparently in response to instructions from government authorities, speculating that the Xi administration has chosen to enhance its own sanctions in view of the Trump administration’s repeated calls for pressure.

Sunday’s dailies also reported on the Chinese government’s announcement on Saturday that it will stop exporting refined oil products to North Korea in accordance with the latest UN sanctions

resolution. In addition, China will stop importing DPRK textiles beginning in October. The papers said that while Beijing may be promoting a policy of turning up the pressure on the Kim dynasty, it remains to be seen whether such sanctions will be strictly enforced. In fact, Sunday's Sankei front-paged a report on Chinese government data pointing to a 25% increase from the previous year in Chinese exports to North Korea in the first 8 months of this year, noting that China has apparently been disregarding UN sanctions resolutions on the DPRK.

U.S., Japan distrustful of South Korea's approach toward North Korea

Most Saturday dailies took up the trilateral summit on North Korea held in New York on Thursday between President Trump, Prime Minister Abe, and ROK President Moon. The papers noted that although the three officials confirmed the need to step up the pressure on the Kim regime, the U.S. and Japan are not pleased with the Moon administration's decision to offer humanitarian assistance to Pyongyang. The U.S. and Japan are reportedly growing increasingly skeptical about South Korea's approach toward its northern neighbor. Mainichi said the U.S. and Japan need to persuade South Korea to take a hard line toward North Korea in view of the Kim regime's apparent determination to escalate provocations.

In a related story, today's Asahi claimed that the Chinese are not comfortable with the hard line against North Korea taken by the Abe administration, noting that they took issue with a recent op-ed piece written for the New York Times by Abe, in which he said that "dialogue with North Korea would be a dead end." The Chinese side reportedly called Abe's op-ed "belligerent" in recent bilateral talks with the South Koreans.

Kono urges nations to sever diplomatic ties with DPRK

Saturday's Sankei highlighted a speech delivered at Columbia University on Thursday by Foreign Minister Kono, during which he asked countries that have diplomatic relations with North Korea to sever them in order to dissuade it from continuing to pursue nuclear and missile development. Pointing out that more than 160 nations currently maintain diplomatic relations with Pyongyang, the top Japanese diplomat stressed that now is the time to apply maximum pressure on the North.

Comfort woman memorial unveiled in San Francisco

Sunday's Sankei reported that a ceremony was held in San Francisco on Friday to unveil a comfort woman statue that was erected by local Chinese citizens, saying it is the third memorial of its kind to be built in the U.S. The epigraph on the statue that was approved by the city authorities refers to the victims as "sex slaves."

GOJ may help renovate airport on Northern Territories

Monday's Mainichi took up press remarks made on Sunday by State Minister for Foreign Affairs Nakane, who suggested that the GOJ may help upgrade an airport on Kunashiri Island in the Northern Territories. The official made the comment after the first-ever chartered flight carrying

Japanese citizens to the island to visit the graveyards of their ancestors on Saturday was not able to return to Hokkaido on the same day due to inclement weather. Although the MOFA official said the repairs would be made in a manner that is compatible with Japan's legal claim to the disputed islets, the daily said Japan's concrete involvement in the proposed initiative remains unclear.

ECONOMY

Economic dialogue to take place in mid-October

Saturday morning's Yomiuri reported that the U.S. and Japan are likely to convene the second session of their bilateral economic dialogue in Washington on Oct. 16, predicting that Vice President Pence and Deputy Prime Minister Aso will discuss such issues as infrastructure exports in Asia, Japan's safeguard against U.S. beef imports, and the bilateral trade imbalance.

Mainichi said the U.S. and Japan are expected to launch sector-by-sector panels under the economic dialogue tasked with expediting discussions on such issues as bilateral trade, energy cooperation, and intellectual property protection.

U.S.-Japan atomic energy cooperation pact to be extended

Saturday's Asahi and Tokyo Shimbun reported that the present U.S.-Japan atomic energy cooperation treaty, which is scheduled to expire in July 2018, will be automatically extended since the Trump administration has decided not to call for its revision or abrogation. An unnamed senior State Department official was quoted as saying: "Although the agreement is set to expire in 2018, it will continue to be valid unless either side requests its termination. We have no plans to call for its abrogation or renegotiation."

Tokyo Shimbun speculated that the Trump administration has chosen not to call for renegotiating the agreement since doing so would embolden parliamentary opponents of both nations to take issue with Japan's plutonium stockpile and failed nuclear fuel recycling policy. Asahi said Washington has decided not to seek revision at a time when enhanced mutual coordination is imperative to deal with North Korea's relentless provocations. The paper added that the U.S. will still call for Japan to reduce its stockpile of plutonium, quoting an unnamed high-ranking DOS official as saying: "We are aware of concerns related to the management of the plutonium that Japan possesses.... We will be urging Japan to specify concrete steps toward reducing the stockpile."

TPP members make progress in Tokyo talks

All Saturday papers wrote that the chief negotiators of the TPP member states wrapped up their two-day session in Tokyo on Friday, saying that they narrowed down the items to be "frozen" from around 80 to 50. The negotiators are expected to meet again in Tokyo in October so that the leaders of the "TPP 11" will be able to reach a rough consensus for the effectuation of the agreement when they meet in Vietnam in November on the margins of the annual APEC summit. The daily said Japan,

Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore remain at odds with Vietnam and others who are hoping to freeze as many items as possible.

In a related development, Sunday papers reported on the results of the general election in New Zealand on Saturday, explaining that although the ruling party won a plurality, it will have to start talks for launching a coalition government with a third party that is opposed to the TPP. Depending on the outcome of the coalition negotiations, the government of Prime Minister English may be forced to alter its pro-TPP stance.

SECURITY

Aegis Ashore batteries to be installed at SDF bases in eastern, western Japan

Sunday Asahi front-paged a GOJ plan to install two Aegis Ashore platforms at existing SDF camps in Eastern and Western Japan for operational deployment starting in FY2023. ASDF facilities in Akita, Niigata, and Nagasaki are being considered as possible installation sites. The GOJ has concluded that using existing ASDF radar sites would be preferable given that no additional measures would need to be taken to address potential radio disturbances caused by the deployment of the state-of-the-art missile defense batteries.

Onodera says parachute training at Kadena incompatible with bilateral agreement

Saturday's Mainichi took up remarks made to the press on Friday by Defense Minister Onodera in which he said that the parachute drop training conducted by the U.S. military at Kadena AB on Thursday was "not in line with the U.S.-Japan agreement." He urged the U.S. to carry out parachute training on Iejima.