



Morning Alert - Thursday, December 21, 2017

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HEADLINES

Morning news

All networks gave top play to reports that the Japan Sumo Association held a meeting yesterday on the alleged assault by Harumafuji, during which it was decided that Harumafuji as well as his stable master Isegahama and two other Mongolian grand champions will be punished.

Major front-page items in national dailies included the ruling LDP's deliberations on revising Article 9 of the Constitution, the Japan Sumo Association's decision to punish several wrestlers, and the passage of a major tax bill in the United States.

INTERNATIONAL

Susan Thornton appointed top U.S. diplomat in charge of East Asia

All Wednesday evening papers wrote that President Trump has nominated Susan Thornton for the post of Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, a position she currently holds in an acting capacity. While noting that she has been closely involved in the formulation of China policy under the direction of Secretary Tillerson, the papers said some Republicans, including former White House Chief Strategist Bannon, have been critical of the career diplomat on account of her conciliatory approach toward China. Asahi said the prolonged vacancy of key Asia posts within the Trump administration will finally come to an end following this and the earlier nomination of Randall Schriver for the corresponding portfolio at the Pentagon, as well as the likely appointment of former NSC Senior Asia Director Cha as ambassador to South Korea. Kyodo claimed that Thornton and Cha are viewed as in favor of dialogue with North Korea, claiming that Secretary Tillerson's recent controversial comments on dialogue with Pyongyang without preconditions were made based on Thornton's advice.

Misgivings emerge about weakened deterrence against DPRK

Asahi wrote that concern is growing within the USG about the possible weakening of deterrence against the DPRK following South Korea's request for the Trump administration to put off an annual joint military exercise that is usually held in late February through mid-March, until late March or later so as to enable the Moon administration to host the PyeongChang Winter Olympics successfully by inviting North Korean athletes to participate in the games. According to the paper, despite such apprehension, Washington is likely to heed Seoul's request by calling it a "change in schedule" instead of a postponement, but will refuse to scale back the exercise.

Nikkei ran a similar story saying that Seoul appears to be giving higher priority to the Olympics than pressure on the Kim regime, and that since this conciliatory approach is in line with China's and Russia's calls for dialogue with the DPRK, it is incompatible with the maximum pressure campaign of the U.S. and Japan.

Foreign Minister Kono says Abe's attendance at PyeongChang Olympics difficult

Asahi wrote that during Tuesday's meeting in Tokyo between Foreign Minister Kono and his South Korean counterpart Kang, the Japanese official responded negatively to Kang's message from President Moon inviting Prime Minister Abe to the PyeongChang Olympics by citing the ROK government's reluctance to uphold the 2015 bilateral comfort women agreement. Kono reportedly told Kang that if the Moon administration elects to dismiss the pact as a result of its ongoing review, it would be difficult for the premier to travel to South Korea on account of the probable deterioration in Japanese public sentiment toward Seoul. The daily added that Abe is still undecided on whether he should attend the Olympics in South Korea since Japan also needs South Korea's cooperation in making the 2020 Olympic in Tokyo a success.

In related stories, Yomiuri and Tokyo Shimbun wrote that the ROK foreign minister disclosed to the South Korean press corps in Tokyo on Wednesday that the Moon administration will provide a heads-up to the GOJ on the results of the ongoing review of the comfort women pact before a Foreign Ministry taskforce on the matter announces them on Dec. 27. Kang reportedly explained that the panel's deliberations are strictly limited to the examination of the negotiation process with Japan and do not include any policy recommendation on the subject for the Moon administration. She said the ROK government will decide on what to do with the accord with Japan by taking into account the results of the review and opinions from the victims and their supporters.

Russia voices opposition to Aegis Ashore deployment

Yomiuri took up remarks made on Tuesday by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Morgulov, who criticized Japan's recent official decision to procure Aegis Ashore batteries by saying that it will have adverse effects on bilateral relations and the proposed conclusion of a peace treaty. The senior Russian diplomat stressed that it is clear that the Japanese platforms will ultimately be integrated into the U.S. missile defense system operated in Asia.

MOFA issues statement condemning cyberattack by North Korea

Mainichi wrote that the Foreign Ministry on Wednesday released a statement condemning North Korea for instigating the “WannaCry” ransomware attack in May, noting that the announcement was made in line with the Trump administration’s conclusion regarding Pyongyang’s involvement in the massive cyberattack.

GOJ to pay UNESCO dues

Yomiuri wrote that the GOJ plans to earmark some \$36 million to pay UNESCO dues based on the judgment that proper measures have been taken to address the lack of transparency in the UN cultural body’s internal deliberations regarding its Memory of the World program. The GOJ took issue with UNESCO’s decision in 2015 to include documents related to the Nanjing Massacre submitted by the Chinese in the Memory of the World Register. The payment will be made by the end of this year.

SECURITY

Playground of primary school near Futenma to remain closed

Tokyo Shimbun wrote that the authorities of the elementary school adjacent to MCAS Futenma where a window fell from a USMC helicopter have decided to keep its playground closed through the end of this year on the grounds that there is still concern about similar incidents happening in the future.

GOJ to trim budget for Okinawa

Asahi, Mainichi, and Tokyo Shimbun reported that the Abe administration plans to reduce funding for economic revitalization in Okinawa in FY2018 to below \$2.8 billion, noting that this is the second consecutive reduction and that the amount is almost \$365 million less than the peak year of FY2015. The considerable reduction signifies the central government’s cool approach toward Governor Onaga on account of his strong opposition to Futenma relocation.

POLITICS

LDP to continue discussions on revision of Article 9

All papers wrote that the ruling LDP’s taskforce on constitutional amendment decided on Wednesday to continue discussions through next year on a proposed change to Article 9. Although taskforce members agreed to make the existence of the SDF explicit in the Article 9, they were at odds over two proposals -- one preserving the second clause of the article that says Japan will not maintain armed forces and the other deleting the same clause. Prime Minister Abe favors the first option based on the judgment that it is more “realistic” in terms of obtaining public support.

ECONOMY

TPP11, Japan-EU EPA to increase GDP by almost \$120 billion

Nikkei took up a GOJ estimate regarding the economic benefits of the TPP 11 and the Japan-EU EPA, noting that as a result of the two gigantic free trade arrangements, Japan's GDP will increase by approximately \$74 billion and \$46 billion, respectively, and a total of 750,000 new jobs will be created. The total figure for the increase in GDP and the figure for new jobs are reportedly equivalent to the estimates for the original TPP that included the United States.

