



Morning Alert - Tuesday, December 26, 2017

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HEADLINES

Morning News

NHK and NTV led with reports on blizzards in northern Japan, while other commercial networks led with follow up reports on the assault incident involving former sumo Grand Champion Harumafuji.

Major front-page stories in national papers included the GOJ idea to modernize an MSDF destroyer to allow it to host USMC F-35Bs, an update on the bid-rigging involving the nation's top four general contractors on a maglev construction initiative, and an article posted on a Chinese-government-affiliated website saying Beijing has built artificial islands in the South China Sea for "military purposes."

INTERNATIONAL

UN decides on new sanctions against DPRK

All Sunday papers reported that the UN Security Council on Friday adopted a sanctions resolution against North Korea, noting that the unanimous vote represents the international community's strong condemnation of the DPRK's relentless pursuit of nuclear and missile technology. The new resolution calls for reducing exports of gasoline and refined oil products to the country by 90%. It also indicates the council's readiness to further restrict petroleum supplies to North Korea in the event of additional provocations such as a nuclear test or ICBM launch. The resolution also requires the repatriation of all North Koreans working in UN member states within two years. The papers said the Kim regime is bound to react strongly to the additional punitive measures. Monday papers highlighted a statement issued by the DPRK Foreign Ministry denouncing the latest resolution as an "act of war that disrupts peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the region."

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Abe issued a statement on Saturday saying that the resolution will raise the punitive measures against Pyongyang to an unprecedented level. The premier asked all UN member states to enforce it fully.

U.S. to check China's enforcement of sanctions against DPRK

Monday's Asahi took up the disclosure by several USG sources that President Trump and Chinese President Xi agreed at their summit in Beijing on Nov. 9 to exchange information on the status of enforcement of UN sanctions and their impact on the North Korean economy. According to the article, U.S. commerce, tax, and financial officials will check whether the Chinese are implementing the UN sanctions appropriately every few months. The two militaries also plan to set up a "hotline" to exchange information on North Korea. The paper added that the two governments and militaries have also engaged in discussions on a possible contingency on the Korean Peninsula, speculating that the Chinese are eager to deepen coordination with Washington on North Korea with the goal of heading off a U.S. military attack on their defiant neighbor.

In a related article, Sunday's Nikkei wrote that China has already begun considering taking concrete measures to prepare for the possibility of a contingency in North Korea. The paper claimed that the Xi administration has instructed relevant authorities to set up refugee camps that can shelter as many as half a million people along the North Korean border and that barracks are being built for PLA Army personnel to strengthen border patrols.

Sugiyama likely to be tapped as envoy to Washington

Saturday's Asahi reported that the Abe administration is considering replacing Ambassador to the U.S. Sasae with Vice Foreign Minister Sugiyama, projecting that an official decision will be made in early January. The daily said the GOJ has decided that it is time to send a new envoy to the U.S. capital since Sasae has been in the post for more than five years. Other papers ran similar stories on Sunday, with Sankei claiming that Deputy Foreign Minister Akiba will be promoted to the post of vice foreign minister.

Top government spokesman comments on Sino-Japanese relations, DPRK

Monday's Mainichi and Sankei both published interviews with Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga, highlighting his optimistic outlook for Tokyo's ties with Beijing. He said bilateral relations are in good shape and expressed hope that Prime Minister Abe and Chinese President Xi will visit each other's countries next year. He suggested that a trilateral summit with South Korea may be convened in Japan next spring. The government spokesman also commented on the North Korean situation, saying that there may be some new developments in the next several months since the Kim regime will be in an increasingly tight spot due to the latest UN sanctions resolution.

Japan voted in favor of UN resolution on Jerusalem to maintain ties with Middle East

Saturday's Nikkei wrote that the GOJ voted in favor of the UN General Assembly motion on Jerusalem in order to maintain a relationship of trust with Middle East countries. As the GOJ concluded that even abstaining would damage the nation's ties with the region, Tokyo had reportedly conveyed to Washington its plan to vote in favor of the resolution beforehand. An unnamed high-ranking GOJ official said that the Trump administration understood Japan's position. Mainichi ran a similar story.

In a related development, Nikkei wrote today that Foreign Minister Kono met with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu in Jerusalem on Monday and urged him to exercise restraint in dealing with Arab countries' strong reaction to the U.S. decision.

MOFA projects North Korea aiming to begin dialogue with foreign powers

Saturday's Asahi took up remarks made to an LDP panel on Friday by an unnamed senior MOFA official, who projected that the DPRK may soon seek dialogue with foreign countries as a self-proclaimed nuclear power so as to urge them to relax economic sanctions against it. The MOFA official also indicated that Pyongyang may elect to launch more missiles to complete its ICBM capability.

Oil products smuggled into North Korea on high seas

Saturday's Yomiuri gave top play to the disclosure by several sources connected to the governments of the U.S., Japan, and South Korea that North Korea has been smuggling petroleum products, such as jet fuel, in international waters by receiving them from foreign vessels, including from China. This type of seaborne smuggling has increased sharply following the adoption of a UN Security Council resolution in September that restricts imports of refined oil products. The smuggled petroleum has apparently been used for operating fighter jets and missiles.

Japan, Australia to seal VFA

Monday's Yomiuri gave top play to Australian Prime Minister Turnbull's planned visit to Japan in mid-January, forecasting that he and Prime Minister Abe are likely to forge a consensus on concluding a visiting forces agreement (VFA) so that their military operations in each other's nations can be conducted smoothly. While the two sides are aiming to officially sign and effectuate the agreement in 2019, discussions on elements such as the legal jurisdiction over crimes by military personnel will continue for a while due to their delicate nature. The daily said the Abe administration is keen to strengthen defense ties with the "quasi-ally" to rein in North Korea and China with the ultimate goal of creating a "free and open Indo-Pacific" region. Today's Mainichi ran a similar story, adding that the two leaders will also probably confirm close coordination so that the TPP 11 member states can officially sign the regional free trade pact in February or March 2018.

Poll shows drop in affinity with U.S. among Japanese

Most Sunday papers reported on the results of a Cabinet Office public opinion survey that showed a decline in Japanese people's affinity with the U.S. Some 78.4% of respondents said they felt affinity with the U.S., down 5.7 points from a year ago. This was reportedly the first time in seven years for the figure to dip below 80%.

G-20 summit to be held in Osaka in 2019

Saturday's Sankei led with the disclosure by several GOJ sources that coordination is underway within the GOJ to host the G20 summit in Osaka in 2019 based on the judgement that Western Japan's largest city is more appropriate than any of the other candidate sites, including Nagoya and Fukuoka, in terms of ensuring security and the availability of accommodations for the visiting dignitaries. The GOJ plans to convene the two-day confab either in June or November. Other papers ran similar reports on Sunday.

Japan earmarks \$50 million for World Bank fund championed by Ivanka Trump

Saturday's Tokyo Shimbun wrote that the GOJ decided on Friday to allocate some \$50 million in FY2018 for a World Bank women's entrepreneurship fund conceived by Ivanka Trump, noting that Prime Minister Abe pledged the amount in contributions to the fund when the President's eldest daughter visited Tokyo in early November. The daily wrote that the "generous" contribution surprised some experts because the GOJ had initially planned to dispense the money over four years, with the originally proposed amount for the next fiscal year being just over \$12 million.

SECURITY

GOJ decides not to allocate funds for Osprey deployment in Saga

Saturday's Nikkei wrote that the GOJ has decided against earmarking funds in the FY2018 budget for building facilities to station GSDF Ospreys at Saga Airport due to strong opposition among local fishermen and other people. As a result, the Defense Ministry will probably not be able to operate the aircraft starting in FY2019 as originally planned. Since it is expected to take three years to construct such facilities, the daily predicted that the operational deployment of the Japanese MV-22s will not begin until 2022 or later.

Japan uncertain of U.S. defense commitment to Senkakus

Saturday's Asahi wrote that despite the Trump administration's assurances that the Senkaku Islands fall under the scope of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, some GOJ officials are not sure whether Washington would indeed commit troops to the defense of the outcrops in the event of a contingency involving China. The daily highlighted remarks on the Senkakus made in 2013 during a public hearing of an experts' panel commissioned by Congress by a retired Navy admiral, who said: "The U.S. government must do its utmost to avoid exchanging fire with the PLA over the uninhabited islands.... The deserted isles have no geopolitical or essential value." The daily quoted an unnamed senior SDF official as saying: "The U.S. military has no intention to shed blood for [the defense of] Senkakus."

MOD looking to procure “carrier-borne” fighters

Monday’s Tokyo Shimbun wrote that the Defense Ministry is examining the possibility of introducing F-35Bs that can be operated on the MSDF’s helicopter carriers, noting that if the procurement is realized, the destroyers would become “attack-mode aircraft carriers,” which may constitute a violation of Article 9 of the Constitution. The ministry is considering replacing some of F-35As that Japan has decided to procure with the Marine variant of the stealth fighter. The ministry is hoping to operate them on “light aircraft carriers” to strengthen the defense of remote islands around Okinawa.

Tuesday’s Yomiuri published a similar story on its front-page, asserting that the GOJ is mulling the idea of renovating the MSDF destroyer Izumo to enable it to host USMC F-35Bs. While noting that under the plan the destroyer will be converted into the nation’s first aircraft carrier, the article said the flattop will be introduced as a platform for defending remote islands so as to maintain the existing policy that the nation cannot possess an attack-mode aircraft carrier under the Constitution. By allowing the takeoff and landing of the U.S. stealth fighter on the envisaged MSDF flattop for refueling, the GOJ is hoping to advance operational integration between the U.S. military and the SDF to deter DPRK provocations and China’s maritime advancement. The daily projected that the controversial idea is bound to trigger fierce debate at the Diet, as the GOJ plans to update the present National Defense Program Guidelines in late 2018.

Northern Training Area returned to landowners

Asahi and Yomiuri reported on Tuesday that a ceremony was held in Okinawa on Monday to mark the return to local land owners of the property that used to constitute parts of the Northern Training Area. Defense Minister Onodera, who attended the event, said: “We will continue to do whatever we can to reduce the base-hosting burden as much as possible.” The 4,000 hectares of land had reverted to Japanese administration about a year ago. Governor Onaga did not attend the event because of a “scheduling conflict.”

Kadena airman arrested for DUI

Monday’s Asahi reported that the Okinawa police arrested a U.S. serviceman at Kadena AB for allegedly driving under the influence of alcohol in Ginowan early Sunday morning, saying that his blood alcohol level was more than double the permissible limit. The suspect has reportedly denied the charge.

Japan Coast Guard to introduce new missile warning system for commercial vessels

Saturday’s Yomiuri wrote that the Japan Coast Guard has decided to employ a new missile warning system that will allow it to send to commercial vessels a warning immediately after the DPRK launches a missile. As it takes about three minutes to issue a warning under the existing system, the new mechanism will drastically shorten the time.

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