



Morning Alert - Friday, January 5, 2018

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HEADLINES

Morning news

NHK gave top play to a report on a teleconference between President Trump and South Korean President Moon on Thursday, during which they agreed not to hold annual bilateral joint military exercises during the PyeongChang Olympics next month. NTV, TBS, and Fuji TV led with reports on the first auction of the year at Tsukiji fish market this morning. TV Asahi gave top play to reports on the assault scandal involving Harumafuji.

Major front-page items in national dailies included Prime Minister Abe's New Year's press conference on Thursday in which he voiced strong resolve to amend the Constitution, and the U.S.-ROK agreement not to hold bilateral joint training during the Olympics.

INTERNATIONAL

U.S. agrees not to hold joint training with ROK during Olympics

All papers reported that President Trump and ROK President Moon spoke by phone on Thursday and agreed not to conduct annual bilateral joint exercises during the PyeongChang Winter Olympics in February on the condition that the DPRK refrains from provocations. In response to Moon's explanation of the status of inter-Korean dialogue, President Trump reportedly said: "I don't mind you saying military training won't be conducted during the Olympics.... Please let me know whenever you need help on dialogue with North Korea. The United States supports you one hundred percent." According to Asahi, the U.S. leader reportedly confirmed that he will send a high-level U.S. delegation including his family members to the Olympics.

Asahi wrote that the teleconference was aimed at reminding North Korea, China, and Russia that reconciliation between the Moon administration and the Kim regime will not affect trilateral cooperation between the U.S., South Korea, and Japan. Nikkei said by postponing the planned exercise with South Korea, President Trump is perhaps hoping to test North Korea's sincerity toward dialogue, adding that Washington and Tokyo are still concerned that Seoul will be tempted to ease pressure on its neighbor in response to Kim Jong Un's peace overture. Mainichi noted that the U.S. leader offered "support" for realizing inter-Korean dialogue by heeding Seoul's request for postponement of the drill.

In a related development, most papers took up a tweet by President Trump on the mounting mood of rapprochement between South and North Korea.

South Korean leader offers apology to former comfort women

All papers reported that South Korean President Moon met with eight former comfort women and their supporters on Thursday and apologized for the 2015 comfort women accord with Japan by saying: "It is not compatible with truth and justice. It was entirely wrong both in terms of content and procedures. I would like to apologize for the agreement being concluded without listening to your opinions. I cannot deny that it is an official agreement, but I don't think the comfort women issue has been settled with this pact." Projecting that when he announces his administration's policy on the bilateral pact on Jan. 10, the ROK leader will probably have little choice but to honor the accord so as to prevent the further deterioration of ties with Tokyo, Asahi speculated that Moon chose to extend an apology in advance in order to deflect potential criticism from the victims and the public. Noting that the elderly victims have called for a formal apology from Japan, Yomiuri and Nikkei voiced concern that Seoul may ask Tokyo to take additional measures to ease their suffering.

According to the dailies, the GOJ reacted sharply to President Moon's apology and filed a protest through diplomatic channels by saying: "Bilateral relations may become unmanageable if the South Korean government tries to alter an agreement that has already been implemented." Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga separately said on a TV show last night that the comfort women accord "must not be altered one iota."

Foreign Minister Kono meets with Pakistani counterpart

Several papers reported that Foreign Minister Kono held talks with his Pakistani counterpart in Islamabad on Thursday, during which they agreed to increase cooperation in such areas as combatting terrorism to ensure stability in Afghanistan. According to Yomiuri, with President Trump's recent tweet on terrorists fleeing from Afghanistan into Pakistan apparently in mind, Kono said: "The stability of both Afghanistan and Pakistan is extremely important for regional stability." Nikkei and Mainichi wrote the Japanese minister also called on Pakistan to strictly enforce UN sanctions on North Korea.

POLITICS

Abe vows to amend Constitution

All papers reported on Prime Minister Abe's New Year's press conference yesterday, during which he expressed his strong interest in revising the nation's supreme law at an early date by saying: "I would like to deepen national debate by presenting this year a draft of an ideal constitution that can offer hope for a new era." While quoting Abe as also saying, "Although the timeframe should not be given priority, the formation of a broad consensus across party lines is expected," Asahi speculated that this remark reflected the premier's desire to have the Diet initiate an amendment by the summer of 2019 at the latest when an Upper House election will be held. The paper claimed that the premier is actually aiming to have the ruling LDP draft its own proposal this March so that the parliament can start the process of revision in the extraordinary Diet session in the autumn for a national referendum in the spring of 2019 ahead of the Emperor's abdication scheduled for April 30, 2019.

SECURITY

Senior LDP officials campaign for Nago mayoral candidate supportive of FRF plan

Yomiuri, Sankei, and Tokyo Shimbun reported that LDP Secretary General Nikai and his top two deputies visited Nago in Okinawa yesterday to campaign for a candidate who plans to challenge incumbent Mayor Inamine's reelection bid in the race scheduled for Feb. 4. The ruling party is set to mobilize as many resources as possible to defeat the anti-FRF municipal leader, with the ultimate goal of unseating Governor Onaga in the gubernatorial race scheduled for this winter. Tokyo Shimbun added that the upcoming race will be the sixth Nago mayoral election in two decades in which the FRF construction off Camp Schwab is the major campaign issue. Inamine defeated his pro-FRF rivals in the two previous races.

GOJ to increase information sharing with private sector to ensure cyber defense

Sankei wrote that the GOJ plans to amend relevant laws to launch a consultative body on cybersecurity with the private sector which includes infrastructure operators, software companies, educational institutions, and other entities with the goal of sharing information on cyberattacks. The secretariat of the envisaged entity will be established within the Cabinet Office and an influential business leader will probably be tapped as its chairman.