



Morning Alert - Monday, March 26, 2018

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HEADLINES

Morning news

NHK, NTV, and TV Asahi gave top play to reports that three people died and four were injured after a fall while climbing Mt. Amida in Nagano on Sunday. Fuji TV led with a report that 37 people were killed in a fire that broke out at a shopping center in Siberia on Sunday. TBS reported on the LDP's annual convention held on Sunday.

Major front-page items in national dailies included Prime Minister Abe's comment on Sunday reiterating his strong desire to amend the Constitution, the results of a public opinion poll pointing to the public's strong dissatisfaction with the Abe administration's handling of the document-tampering scandal involving the Finance Ministry, and the numerous gun control demonstrations held across the United States on Saturday.

INTERNATIONAL

Appointment of Bolton as national security adviser sends message to DPRK

All Saturday papers reported on President Trump's decision to replace National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster with John Bolton, asserting that the former Ambassador to UN is a "hardliner" on foreign policy and has been advocating the use of military force against North Korea as well as Iran. Asahi claimed that the appointment demonstrates the President's intention not to make any concessions in negotiations with North Korea. Sankei conjectured that the appointment shows that the administration is determined to press North Korea to denuclearize. The paper also said Bolton's past experience as under secretary of state and ambassador to the UN under the Bush administration will help the administration prepare for a U.S.-DPRK summit in May. Nikkei and Sankei also speculated that with the addition of Bolton to the Trump administration, the U.S. may decide to abrogate the Iran nuclear deal. Mainichi wrote that the replacement of McMaster with

Bolton has made clear that President Trump is planning to surround himself with advisers who agree with his policies and political views in order to fulfill his campaign pledges.

PM Abe voices hope for progress on abduction issue

Monday's Sankei reported that Prime Minister Abe indicated during the ruling LDP's annual convention on Sunday that when he meets with President Trump next month, he will ask the U.S. leader to bring up the abduction issue during the proposed summit with Kim Jong Un. "I promise to do my utmost so that progress can be made when the U.S.-DPRK summit is held," said Abe. Commenting on his upcoming summit with President Trump, the premier also stated: "I will hold in-depth discussions with him on the nuclear and missile issues to defend Japan and ensure its national security."

DPRK leadership allegedly calls proposed summit with U.S. "diplomatic victory"

Today's Mainichi took up the disclosure by a source with informants in North Korea that the DPRK leadership has described the proposed summit between Kim Jong Un and President Trump as a "diplomatic victory." According to the source, the leadership told mid-ranking officials of its Workers' Party recently that "as a result of a diplomatic victory, the groundwork has been laid for discussions with the United States." The Kim regime apparently believes that the U.S. has decided to come to the negotiating table in response to the peace overtures made since early this year by Kim Jong Un.

North and South Korea to hold ministerial meeting on March 29

Sunday's Nikkei and Sankei and Saturday evening's Asahi and Mainichi reported that North and South Korea agreed on Saturday to hold a ministerial meeting on March 29 to decide on the agenda for the North-South summit scheduled for late April. Noting that the focus of the summit will be whether Seoul will be able to press Pyongyang to draw up a concrete plan for denuclearization, Nikkei said the main topic at the upcoming inter-Korean ministerial meeting will also be denuclearization. Sankei reported that the ministerial meeting will take place on the North Korean side of Panmunjom.

Japan, China to reach agreement on maritime and air communication mechanism

Sunday's Mainichi gave top play to the disclosure by multiple Japanese and Chinese government officials that the two governments are making arrangements to officially reach an agreement on launching a maritime and air communication mechanism between the two nations when Prime Minister Abe meets with Chinese Premier Li in May in Tokyo. Noting that a trilateral summit between Japan, China, and South Korea is slated for May 9 in Tokyo, the paper said Abe's meeting with Li is likely to be held before or after the trilateral summit. The daily reported that although the two nations were at odds over how to describe the areas surrounding the Senkaku Islands, they are likely to prioritize the signing of an agreement without specifically referring to such areas. Monday's Yomiuri ran a similar article.

PM Abe to visit Russia on May 26

Sunday's Mainichi and Sankei reported that visiting Russian Deputy Prime Minister Golodets met with Minister for Economy, Trade, and Industry Seko at an Osaka hotel on Saturday. Golodets reportedly said that Prime Minister Abe will visit Moscow on May 26 for a summit with President Putin and is also expected to visit St. Petersburg.

FM Kono calls for Hong Kong's cooperation in reining in DPRK's smuggling at sea

All national papers except Mainichi reported today on a meeting between Foreign Minister Kono and Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam in Hong Kong on Sunday, during which they agreed to apply maximum pressure on North Korea. The Japanese official reportedly asked for Hong Kong's cooperation in preventing ship-to-ship transfers of prohibited goods involving North Korean vessels in international waters in the East China Sea. Kono also asked the Hong Kong leader to end the territory's ban on some Japanese food imports that has been in place since the Fukushima nuclear accident in 2011.

PM Abe and former President Obama have sushi in Ginza

All Monday papers wrote that Prime Minister Abe invited visiting former President Obama to a sushi restaurant in Ginza for lunch on Sunday, quoting the premier as telling the press afterward that they "had a very good time" discussing past events, such as the G7 Ise-Shima summit, Obama's visit to Hiroshima, and the prime minister's tour of Pearl Harbor. Prior to the lunch, the former U.S. president reportedly delivered a speech in which he stressed the importance of continuing to put pressure on North Korea to curb its nuclear and missile development, which he called a "genuine threat." Obama also reportedly called for continued efforts to achieve a "world without nuclear weapons."

SECURITY

Five Japanese Ospreys may be deployed to Chiba

Monday's Sankei front-paged a speculative piece claiming that the Defense Ministry is inclined to station 5 of the 17 Ospreys that the SDF plans to deploy through 2021 at a GSDF Camp in Kisarazu, Chiba Prefecture, in view of the growing difficulty of basing them at Saga Airport. The five MV-22s are expected to be delivered this year. Although the Kisarazu base has been selected as a temporary site since it already hosts a maintenance facility for the USMC Ospreys, the daily noted that some MOD and SDF officials are concerned that basing the tilt-rotor planes in the Kanto region indefinitely would be detrimental to national security since they are expected to transport SDF amphibious personnel and equipment which will be based in Sasebo, Nagasaki Prefecture, to trouble spots in the event of a contingency.

Transfer of U.S. carrier-borne jets to Iwakuni to be completed ahead of schedule

Saturday evening's Asahi reported that the Ministry of Defense notified local governments in Kanagawa and Yamaguchi that it received information from the U.S. military that two FA-18 fighter

units stationed in Atsugi AB will be transferred to Iwakuni as early as March 24. The paper said these two units will be the last ones to be transferred to Iwakuni, saying that the transfer of U.S. carrier-borne jets from Atsugi to Iwakuni is likely to be completed ahead of schedule.

MOD to resume providing U.S. force realignment subsidies to Nago

Saturday's Asahi, Sankei, and Mainichi reported that on Friday the Ministry of Defense notified the city of Nago in Okinawa that it intends to resume providing U.S. base-hosting subsidies to the city for the realignment of U.S. military forces in Japan. Asahi wrote that the GOJ subsidies amounting to more than one billion yen per year had been suspended under the previous mayor who was opposed to the Futenma relocation plan.

U.S. military displays F-35B to media

Saturday morning's Nikkei reported that the U.S. military showed an F-35B Lightning II stealth fighter to the media on the USS Wasp off Okinawa on Friday. The paper said this is the first time for the fighter to be deployed on an U.S. amphibious assault ship in the Western Pacific. The paper wrote that the aircraft is equipped with vertical landing and advanced detection capabilities and will become a powerful tool for the U.S. military as it expands its deployment capabilities amid the active military operations of North Korea and China.

U.S. Navy destroyer sails near Spratly Islands

Saturday morning's Asahi and Mainichi reported that the USS Mustin, a guided-missile destroyer, sailed near Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands on Friday as part of the U.S. military's freedom of navigation operations. China's Defense Ministry reportedly released a statement on the same day calling the move a military provocation.

In a related story, Saturday evening's Asahi reported that China's state media reported on Friday that the Chinese Navy is planning to conduct combat exercises in the South China Sea soon. The paper added that it learned from a source in Beijing that the Chinese military's aircraft carrier, Liaoning, is expected to participate in the drill for the first time.

PLA Air Force conducted drill in Western Pacific

Monday's Tokyo Shimbun highlighted an announcement made by a Chinese Air Force spokesperson on Sunday that PLA fighters and bombers carried out a training drill in the Western Pacific after passing through the strait between the main island of Okinawa and Miyako Island. The official reportedly did not disclose exactly when the training took place.

MOD to expand SDF's capacity building assistance for South Asia

Sunday's Sankei gave top play to a report that the Ministry of Defense has decided to expand the SDF's capacity building assistance for South Asia by the end of this year, adding that it is considering initially providing such assistance to Sri Lanka. The paper said that although such capacity building assistance has been extended mainly to Southeast Asian nations, the MOD is

planning to use the assistance in South Asia as a tool for promoting Prime Minister Abe's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy."

ECONOMY

Concern grows over possible U.S.-China trade war

All Saturday morning papers gave extensive top and inside-page play to reports on President Trump's signing of executive orders imposing steep tariffs on Chinese products and steel and aluminum imports, with Nikkei claiming that the United States and China are on the brink of a trade war. The paper reported that China is already preparing retaliatory measures, adding that global stock prices plummeted and the value of the yen rose on Friday. The daily expressed concern that if American protectionism creates a global "domino effect," it could upset the free trade system. Asahi, noting that Japan was not excluded from the tariffs on steel and aluminum, claimed that Japan is being dragged into President Trump's deal-making tactics to reduce the U.S. trade deficit on a global scale.

The papers asserted the GOJ's efforts to urge Washington to exempt Japan from the tariffs on steel and aluminum imports have not borne fruit, with Mainichi saying that Japan was the only major U.S. ally that was not excluded. The papers said although Japan plans to continue to urge the U.S. to exempt Japan from the new tariff measures, there are now concerns that the U.S. will urge Japan to agree to bilateral FTA talks. Asahi wrote that unlike the EU, which has been threatening to take retaliatory measures, Japan has taken a soft stance on the matter, quoting a trade official as saying: "Japan has been too weak-kneed. We were naive to think that we would be excluded." The paper said a senior MOFA official expects that Prime Minister Abe will discuss the matter when he meets with President Trump in April if it becomes prolonged, adding, however, that the President may push Japan to enter FTA negotiations despite Japan's reluctance. Asahi reported on the President's remark about PM Abe on Thursday in which he called Abe his friend but warned that Japan will no longer be able to take advantage of the U.S. The paper conjectured that the President is likely to put more pressure on Japan in order to reduce the U.S. trade deficit. Nikkei wrote that Japan's strategy of developing economic and foreign policies based on the personal relationship of trust between the two leaders appears to have reached its limit.

POLITICS

PM Abe vows to amend Article 9 despite growing difficulty

All Monday papers took up Prime Minister Abe's remarks during the ruling LDP's annual convention held in Tokyo yesterday, in which he voiced his strong desire to amend Article 9 of the Constitution at an early date by saying: "By making the existence of the SDF explicit in the Constitution, let's put an end to talk of the unconstitutionality of the SDF. This is the responsibility of the LDP."

However, Asahi asserted that Abe's goal of having the Diet initiate constitutional amendment this year appears to be growing distant due to a plunge in public approval of his cabinet on account of the document tampering scandal involving the Finance Ministry. While the premier had hoped to use the LDP convention on Sunday as a venue to accelerate the momentum for amendment by presenting a concrete proposal centering on revising Article 9, he was not able to do so due to growing reluctance among ruling party lawmakers about constitutional amendment amid public criticism of the administration's handling of the document falsification controversy. As the previous consensus among LDP officials that Abe is a shoo-in for the party presidential race in September appears to be collapsing, the prime minister reportedly may not have enough political capital now to advance his signature policy of updating the nation's supreme law. The daily quoted the LDP's Shinjiro Koizumi as telling the press after the party convention that constitutional amendment will only be possible if the Japanese people have confidence in the administration.

Support for PM Abe plummets

Today's Nikkei gave top play to the results of its latest public opinion survey that put support for the Abe cabinet at 42%, down 14 points from last month, and nonsupport at 49%, up 13 points. This was the steepest monthly decline since the premier took office in December 2012. While attributing the plunge to the document-falsification scandal involving the Finance Ministry, the paper projected that Abe's grip on power is bound to weaken rapidly in the run-up to the LDP presidential election in the autumn. Seven out of ten respondents said the premier should be held accountable for the scandal, with 56% calling for the resignation of Finance Minister Aso.

