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other editorial views

military territory

From The St. Louis Post-Dispatch

If and when the United States ever withdraws its troops and planes from the mainland of Asia, the fallback position, from which our military would retain an Asian presence—even without bases in Japan and Taiwan—would be a grouping of islands known as Micronesia.

This, at least, is what military planners have in mind for the area, which lies just east of the Philippines and is now administered by our Interior Department as a United Nations trust. As Rear Admiral Paul E. Pugh, naval commander in the area, recently told the New York Times, "Contingency operations like the war in Vietnam still need forward supply bases."

Because Washington's primary interest in the 2,141 islands and atolls in Micronesia and the 100,000 persons who live there has been primarily influenced by military considerations, the nation's record of administering the trust territory has been, to put it mildly, less than outstanding. In fact, the United Nations strongly criticized U.S. supervision in 1970, citing shortcomings in education, health care and housing.

Nevertheless, negotiations between Micronesian representatives and Washington are reportedly near to establishing permanent ties between the islands and this country. What Washington has proposed is self-government for Micronesia, except in foreign and military affairs, along with the possibility of relinquishing the right of eminent domain, which we have used to condemn island real estate for military purposes.

Micronesian representatives, under pressure from a strong independence movement which includes one-third of the islanders' elected legislature, are reportedly holding out for an understanding which would permit either party to terminate the arrangement unilaterally while the U.S. position has been that both sides ought to agree to any change.

Negotiations are to resume in March, and if an accord is reached we can look forward to a good deal of rhetoric about mutual respect, cooperation and self-government—all designed to camouflage the formalization of the islanders' colonial status and an official shift in the administration of the area from the Interior Department to the Pentagon.