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Marianas Joining the U.S.

By Robert Trumbull

APIA, SAMOA—It is now considered certain that the strategic Mariana Islands in the Western Pacific will become American territory in the near future, strengthening U.S. defenses on the threshold of Asia.

Negotiations to acquire the group, now part of the American-administered U.N. Trust Territory of Micronesia, will begin in December, according to Washington officials who attended a conference of Pacific Island leaders here.

The other five districts of Micronesia, formerly called the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, are negotiating with Washington separately for a looser association with the United States.

THE FORMULA now under consideration would give the Micronesians autonomy in local affairs with the right to declare independence after a period yet to be decided.

Washington plans to grant the Marianas some kind of commonwealth status along lines to be worked out in the meetings in December, a qualified American source said.

The official added that the islands probably would eventually merge with Guam, an American territory at the southern tip of the Mariana chain. The tawny-skinned people of Guam and the neighboring islands speak the same language, Chamorro, and are racial kin.

LIKE THE approximately 50,000 Guamanians, most of the 13,000 or so people of the northern Marianas have Micronesian, Malay and Hispanic blood strains. They usually have Spanish names and are mostly Roman Catholics. They voted over-

whelmingly to merge with Guam in a plebiscite in 1969, but Guamanian electors rejected the union in their own plebiscite.

However, members of the Guamanian delegation to the island conference say that feelings have changed and Guam would accept the merger.

The case for detaching the Mariana Islands from Micronesia and joining them to the United States in close political union was put last April in a letter to Franklin Haydn Williams, head of the American negotiation team in the talks. The letter was signed by the 11 leading elected leaders of the island.

"OUR EXPOSURE to American democracy," the letter said, "spans over a quarter of a century, since the United States assumed administrative responsibilities of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands at the conclusion of World War II. During this time, we have grown to appreciate and cherish the ideals of democracy and want to join the American political family."

The rest of Micronesia is geographically separate from the Marianas and is inhabited by people with a different ethnic background from that of the 13,000 or so Mariana people, although all are included within the broad Micronesian racial grouping.

IN A "POSITION paper" given to Williams, who was President Nixon's personal representative in the negotiations, the Marianas' delegation described their attachment to the United States.

"For the first time in four centuries, the people of the Marianas now live as free men," the paper said. "Political union with the United States will insure that we keep this freedom so long denied to us."

The statement recalled repeated petitions by the Mariana Islands legislature for American citizenship, backed by unofficial plebiscites in 1961, 1963 and 1969.

Until last April, Washington had ignored the appeals, going along with the U.N. position that the six districts of Micronesia should remain a single political unit despite many differences in language and culture.

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