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Fortress Marianas

The Mariana Islands, about 1,500 miles from Japan and the Philippines and slightly farther from mainland Asia, look more and more like the new keystone to U.S. military efforts in the Western Pacific.

Newly-published reports confirm U.S. plans for a substantial military build-up on Tinian, the base from which atomic bombs were delivered to Japan in 1945.

They show as well that the political romance between the U.S. and the Marianas has become a warm, two-sided affair.

The Marianas are petitioning for a permanent place under the U.S. flag.

Talks on this point held at Saipan Dec. 13-14 dwelt, the reports show, not on "if" this liaison should take place, but how.

Having said earlier that it seems no longer feasible or desirable for the U.S. to continue seeking a common political future for the six island districts of Micronesia, Ambassador Franklin H. Williams said at Saipan that the U.S. this spring will be ready to explore concrete proposals for a permanent political relationship with the Marianas only.

He suggested it might be in a commonwealth form and did not rule out the possibility of eventual liaison with Guam, which has been a U.S. possession since 1898, but is a geographical part of the Marianas.

The areas involved are not great, but they can be strategic military bases.

Guam's 209 square miles already have major Navy and Air Force bases.

Lying to its north, in order, are Rota (32 square miles), Tinian (39 square miles) and Saipan (47 square miles) plus 10 smaller islands and island groups.

Ambassador Williams said the Defense Department's desire is to concentrate its activities as much as possible on Tinian, in order to avoid disruption to the civilian population in the rest of the Marianas. He indicated all services might want to use Tinian, which is now lightly populated, and said relatively small facilities might be sought on Saipan also.

Through referenda and through the statements of their political leaders, the people of the Marianas have made it clear that this arrangement is attractive to them.

Since the people of Palau, 800 miles southwest, are showing an equally strong aversion to military bases, the choice for U.S. planners seems clear: Go where you are wanted.

The record of the Saipan talks suggests that is just what the U.S. plans to do.