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Military Plans for Marianas

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By Orr Kelly

The way in which American power will be arrayed in the Western Pacific in the post-Vietnam, Nixon Doctrine, friendship-with-China era is now becoming apparent.

American naval and air forces gradually are being pushed out of—or withdrawn from—Okinawa, Japan and Taiwan. Their future status in the Philippines, Korea and Thailand is, in varying degrees, uncertain.

But now plans are well along to create a new—and permanent—center of American sea and air power in the Mariana Islands.

Tentative agreement was reached last week under which the Marianas—the northern third of the Micronesian Trust Territory that has been administered since World War II by the United States under a United Nations agreement—would become a part of the United States, with commonwealth status.

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For the people of the Marianas, the arrangement—which must be approved by the U.S. Congress, the Marianas district legislature and the people, in a plebiscite—will mean U.S. citizenship, if they wish it, and what U.S. Ambassador Franklin Hayden Williams has called a “potentially dramatic increase in revenues available to the new commonwealth.”

In a radio address to the people of the area—spread out over thousands of square miles of ocean—Williams said last week that the United States has a primary interest in three

islands for military purposes.

It wants to continue to use the small, remote and uninhabited island of Farallon de Medinilla indefinitely for target purposes.

On Saipan, the United States is willing to give up 320 acres of the 4,960 acres it now holds for military purposes, with the understanding it may in the future use part of the island for military installations.

The major U.S. military interest is in the island of Tinian, from which the B29s that dropped the two nuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki took off.

Under the plan outlined by Williams, Tinian would become a major U.S. naval and air base.

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“The requirements on Tinian are extensive—so much so that we feel we should acquire the northern two-thirds of the island for military purposes,” Williams, who headed the U.S. negotiating team, said.

“The U.S. feels we should also acquire the southern third but would then make this part of the island available to the current residents for normal civilian activities and community life.”

For the fewer than 1,000 residents of the island, this would involve giving up their village of San Jose and moving to the other end of the island—with a new village and moving costs to be paid by the United States.

The great advantage the United States will gain from having a base on U.S. territory is freedom from the frequent political difficulties and the uncertainties of

bases on someone else's land. Together, Tinian and Guam will give the United States bases that are largely free of these kinds of problems.

How Congress will react to the deal is uncertain at this point—largely because almost everyone has been thinking about things other than the Marianas. There may well be those who feel the purpose of the U.S. trusteeship over the Micronesian islands was to help the people prepare for independence rather than to pave the way for a major American military installation. Others certainly will welcome the opportunity that the Marianas deal will provide to withdraw American forces from foreign bases.

The people of the Marianas appear to be generally pleased with the prospect of becoming a part of the United States and, in fact, have been negotiating separately from the other trust territories.

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In those other areas—the Marshalls and the Carolines—there appears to be considerably less affection for the United States and more overt dissatisfaction with the way the U.S. has administered the territories. Thus there may well be more years of negotiations before their future is determined.

As in so many things as grandiose as the American plans for the Marianas, one important aspect is not yet clear: How much will it all cost? One thing is quite obvious, however. This major shift in American military power will not come cheaply.

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