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U.S. close to adding Marianas

By DON OBERDORFER
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TOKYO — The United States is on the verge of acquiring the first permanent addition to its territory since the purchase of the Virgin Islands half a century ago. The new American domain is the proposed "Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas," a thinly populated Pacific island chain 5,000 miles from California.

Negotiations which have taken place without much notice over the past 14 months recently have resolved nearly all the fundamental questions between representatives of the islanders and the official U.S. delegation headed by special presidential representative Franklin Haydn Williams.

In an interview last week, Williams said he hopes for agreement on final terms this fall and submission to the U.S. Congress possibly as early as the first part of next year.

THE MAJOR REASON for American interest in the new territory is the Pentagon plan to build a \$300-million air-naval base on Tinian, the flat-topped volcanic island from which the U.S. Air Force launched its 1945 atomic-bomb raids on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

U.S. negotiator Williams, who is chairman of the San Francisco-based Asia Foundation, said the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Defense Department have determined a national "requirement" for the Tinian base "including air operations and forward deployment of war material and war reserves." According to

Williams, President Nixon approved the military plan in 1971 and reaffirmed it in 1972 after a National Security Council review.

SO FAR, Congress has not been asked to authorize either the proposed base on Tinian or commonwealth status for the northern Marianas chain of which the island is a part. Nevertheless, detailed planning for construction of the base is far along, including projections of a permanent U.S. garrison of 2,500 men plus dependents.

As part of the commonwealth negotiations, the United States has "tentatively agreed" to pay \$13.5 million yearly for seven years plus \$3 million yearly in Federal services to support the domain. The population of the proposed U.S. "commonwealth" would be about 14,000.

Williams said he has consulted informally on the plan to expand U.S. territory with key lawmakers who "led me to believe Congress is favorably disposed and encouraged me in our efforts."

THE PROPOSED Tinian base and the U.S. installations on nearby Guam — a U.S. territory acquired from the Spanish in 1898 — are widely expected to be the American "fall-back position" in the Western Pacific when and if U.S. forces leave South Korea, mainland Japan, Okinawa, the Philippines, Taiwan and other present base areas. U.S. negotiator Williams said there are "no present plans" to redeploy major U.S. operational units to Tinian from elsewhere in Asia but did not deny such a possibility.