

Big Base Planned for Tinian

Marianas Islands May Obtain U.S. Commonwealth Status

By Don Oberdorfer

TOKYO, July 7 (WP).—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 island chain 5,000 miles southwest of California.

Negotiations which have taken place without much notice over the last 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 Williams. In an interview last week, Mr. Williams said he hopes for agreement on final terms this fall and their submission to Congress possibly in the first days of next year.

The major reason for U.S. interest in the new territory is the Pentagon's 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 Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, which used Tinian and nearby Saipan as major bases until pushed off by U.S. landings in World War II, is 1,500 miles to the north.

Mr. Williams, chairman of the San Francisco-based Asia Foundation, said the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Defense Department have officially determined a national "requirement" for the Tinian base, "including air operations and forward deployment of war material and war reserves." According to Mr. Williams, President Nixon approved the plan in 1971 and reaffirmed it in 1972 following a National Security Council review.

2,500-Man Garrison

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 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 region. The population of the proposed "commonwealth" would be about 14,000.

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

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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 "fallback 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.

'No Plans' to Redeploy

Mr. Williams said there are "no present plans" to redeploy major operational units to Tinian from elsewhere in Asia but did not deny that this would be a possibility. "The plans are to go forward [with the Tinian base] regardless of whether we redeploy," he said.

Most of the residents of Tinian, Saipan and the other inhabited parts of the proposed "Commonwealth of Northern Marianas" are believed to be in favor of permanent affiliation with the United States. However, no test votes have been taken recently and a proposed referendum on Tinian alone was vetoed by U.S. authorities early this year, on grounds that this is a decision for the entire Northern Marianas chain.

Since the end of World War II, the Northern Marianas and other parts of the vast mid-Pacific empire of Micronesia have been administered by the United States as a trusteeship under United Nations auspices.