

Leaders in the Marianas Seek Ties to U.S.

By Donald F. Smith
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A "marriage of convenience" combining U.S. military needs and the desires of Mariana Islands political leaders could bring the United States its first territorial acquisition in over 50 years.

Located in the mid-Pacific, the chain of 14 volcanic islands — now part of the Micronesia trust territory — bear names such as Saipan and Tinian that testify to their strategic location.

With the U.S. military profile low — and getting lower — in Asia itself, the Pentagon's planners again are eyeing the islands 1,700 miles from the Asian mainland and 500 miles from Tokyo as new bases. These bases would form a strategic line serving as a fall-back position for the U.S. military presence in Asia.

The Defense Department already has budgeted \$300,000 for air and naval facilities on Tinian and is planning for a supporting garrison of over 2,000 American servicemen and their families. Plans to bring Saipan, now the territorial capital of Micronesia, up to military standards also are in the works.

Like Puerto Rico, the Marianas Islands are working toward obtaining a compact with the United States similar to what Puerto Rico has with the United States. If a draft compact to that end is ratified, such a relationship could replace a U.S.-administered United Nations' trusteeship.

It is predicted that a second "invasion" by American forces would bring the 100 inhabitants of the Marianas 13.5 million dollars for the next several years. Plans for other islands in the chain are also being considered.

An agreement is expected to be signed this month for a plebiscite vote by the Marianas people on the commonwealth plan, Ambassador F. H. Williams, chief U.S. negotiator on Micronesian political status since 1971, told the Associated Press recently.

Eventual union with Guam, southernmost of the Marianas and a major U.S. Western Pacific base, is expected by political leaders in both Guam and the northern Marianas, Williams said. Guam has been a U.S. possession since the Spanish-American War in 1898 and is administered independently.

IT HAS BEEN over a half century since the United States last acquired a piece of real estate, the Virgin Islands from Denmark for \$25 million. The new territory — the proposed Commonwealth of the Mariana Islands — is located 5,000 miles from the continental United States and is a part of Micronesia, or the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, as the territory is more commonly known.

The scene of bitter fighting during World War II, the Marianas were wrested from the Japanese at an enormous cost in American lives and material. Now a blur of gray for many Americans, the names of islands marking up the chain have left an indelible imprint upon U.S. military history. The B29 Enola Gay took off from Tinian to drop the world's first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, for example.

The Marianas, excluding Guam, have had a complex history and have been a pawn in the hands of great powers throughout their recorded history.

The islands first were discovered and named by the Spanish in the 16th century. They were later taken over by the Chamorro people, who were the rebellious Chamorros.

Spanish authorities had the survivors removed from the principal islands of Saipan, Rota, Tinian, and Pagan to Guam at the end of the 17th Century. After the Spanish era ended in 1899, the islands passed successively through German (1899-1914) and Japanese periods (1914-1945) to the present American period.

SINCE the end of World War II, the Marianas have been one of the six districts comprising the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, the title given the islands in 1947 when the United Nations awarded the area of the United States as a trusteeship.

Since that time, the Marianas and the other five districts, Palau, Yap, Truk, Ponape, and the Marshall Islands, have been part of a vast mid-Pacific territory administered through the Office of Territories in the Department of the Interior.

The area's significance faded after World War II and the mid-states and the islands.

During those years and up to the present, the Marianas Islanders have sought a closer relationship with the United States than have the other five districts. But repeated efforts through petitions to the U.N. Trusteeship Council and the U.S. State Department have failed. The islands have fallen on deaf ears at the U.N. Trusteeship Council and the State Department. The official American position was to discourage separatist tendencies in the region so as to maintain the political integrity of the territory as a viable political entity.

Events in the 1960s and 1970s have brought a new focus to the islands. The U.S. military presence in the region has been reduced, and the islands are being re-evaluated as potential bases.

change in their political status with the United States. While the other five districts balked at an American offer of commonwealth status, the Marianas chain was dissatisfied with the decision as well as the snail's pace at which negotiations had been dragging on.

POLITICALLY active, the Marianas legislature, after issuing its own declaration of independence in the early seventies, virtually seceded from broader Micronesian status talks a year ago.

If the draft compact is ratified, providing for commonwealth status similar to that of Puerto Rico, the

Marianas probably would not actually become a part of the United States much before the 1980s, however. The compact must be approved by Congress and ratified by the U.N. Security Council. In addition, the United States must find a way to end its trusteeship over the rest of its sprawling mid-Pacific area.

The fourteen islands that will make up what may become America's newest territory are the peaks of a submerged mountain chain strung out at intervals extending over 500 miles north of Guam. The islands are volcanic and coral limestone with a tropical climate tempered by trade winds.

The islands are rich in minerals and have a great deal of land suitable for agriculture. Yet the islands of the Marianas lie in the shadow of an unpredictable menace — the typhoon. In recent years, these islands have suffered the brunt of several devastating storms.

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The largest and most important of the Marianas is the island of Saipan, thirteen miles long with an area of 71 square miles. Under the Japanese, Saipan was transformed into a vast sugar cane plantation. Today there is a subsistence economy for most of the Chamorros there who are not working for the gov-

ernment. During the 15 years after World War II, Saipan received a substantial infrastructure of roads, buildings, power and other facilities. The manpower required to maintain such a large complex distorted the economy and lured large numbers of Saipanese away from farming toward better paying U.S. Navy jobs.

Today, with the imminent return of the military to the islands, the Chamorros have rosy visions of a return to the "good old days" when military and defense spending kept them employed as wage earners and gave them a higher standard of living.

Tinian, separated from Saipan by a narrow channel, once again is to become an enormous air and naval facility.

Rota, another island that offers potential growth and development, is 11 miles long and comprises an area of about 43 square miles. During the war, the raising of sugar cane and other products was encouraged by the Japanese. Since that time, the most conspicuous feature of the island is its conquest by jungle vegetation.

While the Marianas have little economic value, military strategists repeatedly have argued the importance of the islands as a back-up

area for the American military posture in Asia and the Pacific.

In the Philippines, for instance, rising nationalism manifested in anti-Americanism, as well as Communist insurgency, threaten both a large U.S. airbase and naval repair facility which would have to be closed if present treaties were disregarded.

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