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Beyond the Marianas

U.S. Senate approval yesterday of commonwealth status for the Northern Mariana Islands appears to settle one of major issues regarding Micronesia's political future.

There are real pros and cons over the basic decision for the Marianas to break with the other five districts of the Trust Territory and negotiate closer ties with the U.S., which still rules the vast central Pacific area under United Nations mandate.

But opposition faltered on the fundamental fact the change was favored by the 14,000 people of the Marianas district. They are akin to the natives of Guam, the longtime separate U.S. territory just to the south.

NOT ONLY did the people of the Northern Marianas District overwhelmingly approve the commonwealth idea, the Senate of the Congress of Micronesia, which represents the entire Trust Territory, approved a resolution urging favorable action on the Marianas agreement before the U.S. Senate.

The U.S. Senate did include a good amendment that now must be agreed upon by the House in conference committee. It would require the U.S. and the Marianas to review the situation in 10 years.

Such a review would open the way for joining with Guam, the most likely future course, for reuniting with the rest of Micronesia, or presumably even for becoming independent, which is most unlikely given present Marianas' attitudes

and plans for a major U.S. base on the island of Tinian.

WITH THE Marianas issue seemingly cleared up, it's expected future political status talks will resume soon between Washington and the Congress of Micronesia for the other five districts.

Six years of off-and-on talks have centered on a status called "free association," involving self-government and essential sovereignty for the Micronesians with the U.S. handling defense and most foreign affairs.

There is still a chance of secession moves by other Trust Territory island districts. The Marshalls, site of U.S. missile test facilities, wants to keep more of its considerable tax revenue. On the other side of Micronesia, Palau wants both to be the site of the new capital (now on Saipan in the Marianas) and more power for local decision making.

SO THE STRUGGLE over Micronesia's political future continues, with the odds uncertain and changing all the time.

Still, there is hope for those who feel Micronesia's best prospects lie in some form of continued political unity. A special convention last November reached dramatic agreement on a proposed constitution for a "Federated States of Micronesia."

This year — finally — could produce the agreement needed with Washington to move toward a brighter political and economic future.