THE FORMER JAPANESE MANDATED ISLANDS

BY FELIX M. KEESING

CURRENT DISCUSSIONS of the future of the ex-Japanese mandated islands often become unrealistic for want of clear understanding of the geographic and human dimensions involved. Vague references are made to "thousands" of islands, or even "countless" islands. Distinctions are suggested between strategic and non-strategic areas as provided in the United Nations Charter, with no precise reference to the existence and distribution of harbor and air facilities. The pros and cons of military versus civilian administration, and problems of self-government and welfare, are discussed on the policy level with frequently vague reference to the actual conditions which will face those charged with handling the islands and their peoples.

Islands Over Extensive Area

The oceanic zone over which the mandated islands are dotted is larger in area than the United States. The distance from Tobi, westernmost of the Palaus, to Mili, easternmost of the Marshalls, is about 2,800 miles. Yet the islands themselves have a combined land area of only some 830 square miles. Even the adding of American Guam and Wake, and the adjacent Bonins, Volcanos and Marcus, brings this total merely to 1,100 square miles. Distances between adjacent islands are usually from thirty to about one hundred miles. Obviously all planning in such a region is subject to the basic problems of communication.

The former mandate is viewed most realistically as containing ninety-four distinct island units: forty-one in the Carolines, thirty-two in the Marshalls, fourteen in the Marianas (with American Guam an additional unit in this archipelago), and seven in the Palaus. Only by counting separately the numerous islets, mainly of coral and sand, along the rims of atolls and in lagoons, also various reefs and shoals barely awash, is the Japanese figure of "about 1,500 islands" reached.

Of these ninety-four island units, seventy were inhabited permanently by the local island peoples before the war: thirty-two in the Carolines, twenty-five in the Marshalls, seven in the Marianas, and six in the Palaus. The others are too small or poor to serve as regular living sites, although several have phosphate deposits which were worked by the Japanese, and most are visited by neighboring islanders for fishing, catching birds, and gathering produce such as coconuts.

Fifty-eight of the ninety-four units are of atoll formation: coral rings of irregular shape resting on submerged banks or peaks, with a central lagoon, and more or less of a ribbon of soil and sand rising a few feet above sea level around the ring. Such atolls range in size from huge Kwajalein, with a lagoon some seventy miles across at its widest axis, to tiny rings a mile or two in diameter. Most of them have only a handful of islets dotted along the reef rim with enough topsoil to carry vegetation and support human life. On the larger atolls, therefore, the population tends to be scattered out in villages at these higher points, adding to the problem of communication.

Another thirty-three of the island units consist of single islands or, in several instances, of two or three clustered together. The Mariana group in the west, and several in the Palaus and Carolines — somewhat over half in all — are "high" islands of rock formation; the rest have a coral and sand base and are low. Only six of these islands are of any size: Ponape (one hundred forty-five square miles), Saipan (seventy-two square miles), and Kusaie, Tinian, Rota, and Angaur. Eleven are too small and poor for habitation.

The three remaining units each comprise a large associated cluster of islands surrounded by an atoll-like barrier reef: Palau, Truk, and Yap. These, variously of rock and coral formation, combine the features of both previous types: the rich marine resources of the lagoon, and the more extensive soil and plant life of the high islands. In terms of the native economy they have carried a proportionately heavier population.

Facts on the Units

For specific study of these island units, the best sources available are the charts published by the U. S. Navy Hydrographic Office, together with descriptions in the Hydrographic Office *Sailing Directions* (No. 165, *Pacific Islands,* Vol. I). Taken by groups the following is a brief summary:

	Marianas(1)	*Palaus*	*Carolines*	*Marshalls*
Area (square miles)	215	180	360	75
Number of Island Units	14	7	41	32
Atolls	----	1	29	28
Separate Islands	14	5	10	4
Island Clusters	----	1	2	----
Number of Inhabited Units	7	6	32	25

(1) Excluding Guam.

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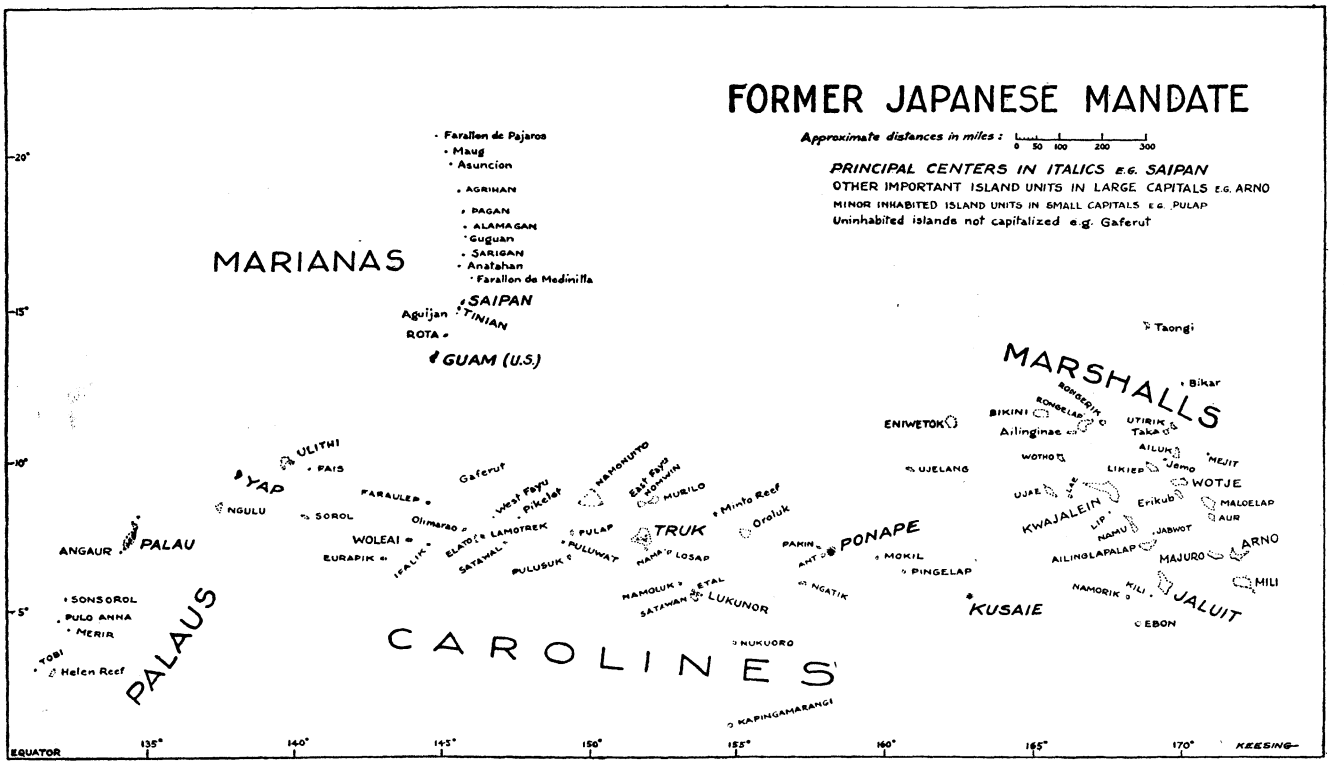
This article gives a brief survey of the essential facts concerning the former Japanese mandated islands, especially from the geographic viewpoint. A second article, in the next issue of the *Far Eastern Survey,* will discuss the peoples involved.



Weather conditions are of special concern in this oceanic, reef-strewn area. The eastern and central zone is influenced primarily by the northeast trade winds, which blow regularly much of the year and tend to build up the weather side of atolls and reefs with coral blocks and other debris of the sea. The western zone is affected by the alternating monsoon winds which blow in and out of the Asiatic continent as its vast land mass heats and cools seasonally. The Palau region is the world's greatest origin point for "typhoons," which sweep west and northwest to the Asian continental area. But potentially more destructive are occasionally severe westerly storms striking the low coral atolls and islets in the Carolines and Marshalls.

The extent of port and anchorage facilities, and of flats and lagoons suitable for use by aircraft, is of vital importance in administration as it is in strategy. Even making allowance for development and improvement work by Japanese and then by American engineers, the number of good harbors suitable for use by large ships is surprisingly small.

On the islands of rock formation, the coastlines tend to drop away steeply or to be choked with reefs. Ships may have to ride off the lee shore, ready to leave at short notice with a change of weather; or if inlets exist with entry passages through the reef such harbors are small, as on Ponape. Of the atoll lagoons, something like two-thirds cannot be entered safely by large vessels because entrance passages are shallow, and in a few cases non-existent, or reefs and coral heads make navigation dangerous inside. Even the large lagoons with good entrance channels have their dangers from reefs and especially from storms which are hardly blocked off by the low atoll rim, or which sweep in from an unusual quarter to whip up the lagoon waters like a great inland sea. Furthermore, most island shores in these tropical waters, even inside the atoll lagoons, have fringing reefs, often extending for several hundred yards from shore (Marines landing on Tarawa can attest to this), so that it is difficult to land except in small boats at high tide.

The best natural harbors in the area are at Truk and Palau. Relatively high islands inside their great barrier reefs ensure calm sheltered anchorages regardless of weather conditions. Yap, Ponape, and Kusaie have good harbors, but they are small, with narrow entrance passages. Of atolls with good entrance and anchorage facilities, subject to the qualifications mentioned above, the most important historically and in terms of their local populations are Ulithi, Woleai, and Lukunor (Chamisso Harbor) in the Carolines, and Jaluit (Jabor Anchorage), Kwajalein, Wotje (Christmas Harbor), Majuro (Darrit Anchorage), Arno (Ine Anchorage), and Mili (Port Rhin) in the Marshalls. All such anchorages were resorts for whalers and other voyagers in the early Pacific days.

Several islands important in modern days have poor natural port facilities. Sugar producing Saipan and Tinian and phosphate-rich Angaur have open roadsteads on the lee shore, supplemented in the case of Saipan with a small inner harbor largely man-made. Even Guam's Apra Harbor, used from the days of the

Spanish galleons, was largely coral choked until the war brought about its improvement. For the less favored islands, small vessels will have to provide the network of sea communications as has been done in the past. But there is plenty of room for development. Channels and landing facilities could be improved, while fast patrol boats could be used for official and other travel in place of the slow auxiliary vessels and sailing craft previously used.

Air facilities have been vastly augmented in the war period, and several of the great bases such as that at Kwajalein may be main links in the chain of trans-Pacific aviation. Yet airfields tend to be limited still to the relatively few principal island units where they can be served by supply ships using the harbors.

Aviation is sure to become a much more important factor in administrative communications than under the Japanese. Probably more airstrips will be laid out for official purposes on islands not counted of strategic significance. A problem may be encountered here, however, of having to cut away coconut groves and otherwise constrict the very limited land areas available for use in subsisting the local populations. For some islands, especially atolls, seaplanes would be more suitable for use than land planes, though reefs and coral heads may have to be blasted out to provide safe runways. Some of the islands are so small that no land strips could be cut, and adjacent waters are likely to be so rough even on the lee shores that they can be served by sea communications only.

The Japanese, as the Germans before them, divided the islands into six units for administrative purposes, with their official and commercial centers at port towns on the principal islands, Palau, Saipan, Yap, Truk, Ponape, and Jaluit. A seventh was recently added by the Japanese, on Tinian. These divisions are based on natural regions, with three units in the widely strung out Carolines, and one each in the Palaus, Marianas, and Marshalls.[2] Koror, the port town of Palau, was capital for the mandate as a whole.

Political Pattern of Control

This political pattern may well be continued, though with adjustments. Assuming that the United States will control the islands, the capital would presumably be shifted to Guam, key strategic and administrative center. It might possibly be desirable to shift the Marshall district center from Jabor, the little port town on Jaluit, to Kwajalein with its major air base. Consideration might be given, too, to building up at least secondary centers for administrative and welfare services on some of the main islands in zones most distant from the seven existing centers: Kusaie, Lukunor (Nomoi Islands), and Woleai, all in the Carolines, and Kwajalein (alternative to Jaluit), Wotje, Majuro or Arno, and Eniwetok in the Marshalls. Some or all of these units could profitably be used as bases for patrols, and for educational, medical and other facilities beyond that able to be provided in the small scattered communities. Finally, the administrative area might be augmented by adding to it not only Guam, but also Wake, Marcus, and the Bonins and Volcanos.

Question of Military and Civilian Control

The picture that has emerged here is of a few key island units with good harbor and air facilities each serving as the focal point for the cluster of adjacent, less favored units. This bears upon the question of possibly dividing such an area into two zones or administrative units, one of strategic or military usefulness, the other not. The outer islands appear to be so dependent upon their focal centers, which are obviously the strategic points, that a separate administration for them and their peoples is hard to conceive: running them would be like trying to run a postal system from a set of scattered postboxes without any postoffices as central clearing houses. This would apply, if the islands are to be internationalized, to any scheme proposing to set aside Palau, Truk, and other strategic units under an administration responsible to the United Nations Security Council, leaving the rest to be handled under the General Assembly as a non-strategic area. It would be equally true, if full United States sovereignty were established instead, of any proposals for correspondingly separate zones of military and civilian control.

Two alternatives seem open in the face of these factors. One is to have unified handling of the islands, as in the past. Presumably this would mean control by the Navy for strategic reasons, as with Guam and American Samoa. The other would treat the islands as a unit, except that certain military zones would be designated on the key islands to serve their strategic functions. This would correspond to the situation in Hawaii, where the necessary land reserves together with port and air facilities are under military control. These could then be the strategic areas if the islands are internationalized.

Under this plan the key centers could continue to serve their historic non-military functions as well. Presumably no native communities would live within the strategic reserves, so that no dual handling of their affairs would be involved. Such a scheme still leaves to be argued the question whether a military or a civilian administration would be preferable for the islands as a whole, or whether some working combination of the two might be achieved.

[2] The two westernmost of the Marshalls, Eniwetok and Ujelang, were included by the Japanese within the Ponape (Eastern Carolines) administrative unit.