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Bush has decided to overthrow Hussein

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WASHINGTON — President Bush has decided to oust Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein from power and ordered the CIA, the Pentagon and other agencies to devise a combination of military, diplomatic and covert steps to achieve that goal, senior U.S. officials said Tuesday.

No military strike is imminent, but Bush has concluded that Saddam and his nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs are such a threat to U.S. security that the Iraqi dictator must be removed, even if U.S. allies do not help, said the officials, who all spoke on condition of anonymity.

"This is not an argument about whether to get rid of Saddam Hussein. That debate is over. This is ... how you do it," a senior administration official said in an interview with Knight Ridder.

The president's decision has launched the United States on a course that will have major ramifications for the U.S. military, the Middle East's future political alignment, international oil flows and Bush's own war on terrorism. Russia and most of America's European allies have expressed alarm about the administration's escalating rhetoric on Iraq.

The course also is fraught with potential military difficulties, with most experts on Iraq warning that a campaign there would not be as swift or virtually free of American casualties as Afghanistan. There, rebels of the northern alliance, backed by U.S. commandos and massive U.S. airpower, quickly overthrew the Taliban regime.

Nevertheless, one foreign leader who met Bush recently came away "with the feeling that a decision has been made to strike Iraq, and the 'how' and 'when' are still fluid," added a diplomat who asked not to be further identified.

The CIA, senior officials said, recently presented Bush with a plan to destabilize Saddam's well-entrenched regime in Baghdad. The plan proposed a massive covert action campaign, sabotage, information warfare and significantly more aggressive bombing of the "no fly" zones over northern and southern Iraq. U.S. and British forces patrol the zones to prevent Iraqi planes from bombing opposition forces.

Bush reportedly was enthusiastic, and although it could not be determined whether he gave final approval for the plan, the CIA has begun assigning officers to the task.

Bush also is dispatching Vice President Cheney next month on a tour of 11 Middle East nations, including many of Iraq's neighbors, whose leaders are leery of a U.S. attack on Baghdad.

While the mission's purpose has been portrayed publicly as sounding out Middle Eastern leaders on Iraq policy, Cheney in fact will tell them that the United States intends to get rid of Saddam and his regime, several top Bush aides said.

"He's not going to beg for support. He's going to inform them that the president's decision has been made and will be carried out, and if they want some input into how and when it's carried out, now's the time for them to speak up," one senior official said.

In the lead-up to Cheney's trip, however, a sharp debate has erupted within the administration over what role Iraqi opposition groups should play, particularly the main group, the Iraqi National Congress.

Officials in the Near East Division of the CIA's Directorate of Operations, the clandestine service, warn that the INC, a coalition of Saddam opponents, is divided by internal feuds and almost certainly penetrated by both the Iraqi and Iranian intelligence services.

"Where the INC is concerned, no real covert operation is possible," said one U.S. intelligence official with experience in the area. "The INC isn't the northern alliance, and the (Iraqi) Republican Guards aren't the Taliban."

In fact, one U.S. intelligence official said Iraqi opposition leaders already have been heard talking about the new campaign to oust Saddam.

Hawks in the office of defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld are pushing for a major role for the INC. Their position was strengthened last month, when Bush called Iraq part of an "axis of evil."

These officials believe the brunt of the fighting can be borne by Iraqi opposition forces - primarily ethnic Kurds in northern Iraq and Shi'ia Muslims in the south - with assistance from U.S. airpower and CIA and special forces advisers on the ground, following the Afghanistan model.

Uniformed military officials, however, are skeptical of the opposition groups, doubtful that Saddam's military will crumble the way the Taliban did and worried that large numbers of U.S. troops could be called on to rescue opposition forces if they get bogged down or trapped.

Bush has made no decisions on the scope or timing of a military strike on Iraq, the senior officials said.

It could take several months or more to move the necessary combat forces into position near Iraq, while the United States also pursues cells of the al-Qaida terrorist network in Yemen, the Philippines, Sudan, Somalia and elsewhere.

The officials said one plan under discussion calls for deploying a single American heavy armored division to establish a "bridgehead" in southern Iraq, while allowing Kurdish and Shiite rebels to do most of the actual fighting.

Others argue that the only way to assure Saddam's demise - and U.S. control over subsequent events - is a full U.S. invasion.

"Trying to topple Saddam with an Afghan-style campaign would be risky and ill advised," Kenneth Pollack, a former White House and CIA expert on Iraq, wrote in the March-April edition of Foreign Affairs magazine.

An invasion of Iraq could be accomplished with 200,000 to 300,000 U.S. forces, including four to six army divisions and supporting units, 700 to 1,000 aircraft, and from one to five aircraft carrier battle groups, Pollack wrote. U.S. casualties would be greater than in Afghanistan or the 1991 Persian Gulf War, "but they are unlikely to be catastrophic," he predicted.

The Pentagon's existing contingency plans for an invasion of Iraq call for the use of 200,000 American ground troops, U.S. officials said. A decade after the Gulf War, Iraq is believed to have around 400,000 active-duty troops, one quarter of them in elite units such as the Republican Guard, and some modern weaponry.

However, the United States may not have the extensive use of bases in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere that it enjoyed during the Persian Gulf War. While many of Washington's Arab allies may go along in the end, for now they oppose "regime change" in Iraq and worry about its effect on populations already angered by 18 months of Israeli-Palestinian violence.

There are other major uncertainties about a U.S. attack on Iraq that, unlike the Gulf War, would be intended to remove its leader.

One is whether Saddam, with nothing to lose, would lash out at U.S. forces, Israel or Arab states backing the United States with Scud missiles tipped with chemical or biological weapons.

Another is the lack of U.S. intelligence assets on the ground to work with opposition forces, assess the strength of Saddam's regime and recruit defectors.

The CIA earlier this year began to reconstitute a small presence in northern Iraq, working with the INC, an official said.

However, he said, there are no CIA officers or agents in southern Iraq and the United States has provided no training or assistance to Shiite opposition groups there. "We're literally starting from scratch in the south," the official said.

Finally, an attack could endanger close U.S. allies such as Jordan, which imports all of its oil from Iraq. "Definitely, it's a nightmare scenario for us," an Arab diplomat said Tuesday.

Bush should keep the focus on fighting international terrorism, where he has broad international backing, Egyptian Ambassador Nabil Fahmy said. "If you mix two issues together, you will lose this focus," he said in an interview last week.

Many nations, including Arab ones, can be expected to question the legality of the United States unilaterally removing another country's government, no matter how distasteful. But a senior State Department official, while unable to provide the precise legal authority for such a move, said, "It's not hard to make the case that Iraq is a threat to international peace and security."

Secretary of State Colin Powell signaled Bush's new approach last Thursday, telling a House of Representatives committee that "regime change" in Iraq "is something the United States might have to do alone."

Increasingly, Powell and other U.S. spokesmen are separating Iraq from the other two members of Bush's "axis of evil," Iran and North Korea, suggesting that they are open to dialogue with the latter two but not with Baghdad.

A diplomatic offensive aimed at generating international support for overthrowing Saddam's regime is likely to precede any attack on Iraq.

The United States and Russia are close to agreement on a streamlined set of economic sanctions on Iraq, an early Powell initiative, that are expected to be approved by the United Nations Security Council and to take effect June 1.

The United States, perhaps with U.N. backing, is then expected to demand that Saddam readmit inspectors to root out Iraq's chemical, biological, nuclear and missile programs.

Weapons inspectors have not been inside Iraq since December 1998. And, with respect for the 11-year-old economic sanctions crumbling, Chinese, North Korean, Indian and European firms have been trying to sell Saddam prohibited military-related goods, the first senior official said.

If Baghdad refuses to readmit inspectors or if Saddam prevents them from carrying out their work, as he has in the past, Bush would have a pretext for action.

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