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CABINET OFFICE FOR MANNING, NO.10  
CENTCOM FOR POLAD

MY TELNO 196

SUBJECT: US/IRAQ: THE MOMENTUM BUILDS

## SUMMARY

1. The Administration appears to be gearing up for a decision on removing Saddam, but are not quite there yet. The "how" is still difficult. The debate looks likely to come to a head this month. The likeliest outcome is some combination of an ultimatum on weapons inspectors, backing of opposition forces, and US military intervention. Cheney's visit to the region in mid-March is likely to be on the critical path of US diplomacy leading to action. We need to encourage the US to build international legitimacy for action, but there may be a tension between this and operational considerations.

## DETAIL

2. My TUR sets out the political context and the intellectual underpinning of Bush's 'Axis of Evil'. The speech has quickened the drumbeat on Iraq. Press commentators (and the Quai, judging from Paris telno 100) are drawing the conclusion that military action is now inevitable. This telegram draws together the numerous views we and senior visitors have heard over the last couple of weeks, to give a snapshot of where things stand.

3. The line that no decision has been taken (as Powell has told you, and said again today on the Hill) may still formally be correct. But there are few parts of the Administration that see any alternative to US action - the real questions now are what, when, and (from our point of view) how much international legitimacy the US will seek to build. The pace of work inside the Administration suggests that Deputies and Principals are now gearing up for decisions on these key issues.

4. As ever, the hawks' agenda is easiest to discern. They feel they have won the argument over whether US action is needed. They are now focusing on (i) the need for speed (momentum, the advantages of surprise, forestalling international criticism), and (ii) the centrality of the INC (a 'government in exile', and potentially another Northern Alliance if only backed by the US).

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5. The reservations in State Department about Chalabi's INC have not diminished. Instead State have been casting around discreetly (once again) to see if other permutations of opposition groupings/leaders might be a more promising partner. But the INC people in town are now more excited than we have seen them, in stark contrast to their gloom before Christmas. A minor victory in getting their limited funding reinstated has boosted their confidence, and they look to Wolfowitz et al to put them at the centre of US planning.

6. The military, meanwhile, continue to look at their plans in expectation that they will be asked to take on a major operation in Iraq this year (this is of course what lies behind CENTCOM's reluctance to provide back-up to an expanded ISAF in Afghanistan). The testing in Afghanistan of new technologies and the ability to integrate them suggest to the Joint Staff that off-the-shelf plans for fighting Desert Storm again could be replaced by something smaller and smarter. But they remain very worried about the ideas being pushed by DoD civilian hawks, above all the perception that this would be easy to do quickly. Their planning is likely to take into account not only the difficulty of a summer campaign, but also logistical constraints such as

, etc. And so far, all this planning remains on a contingency basis.

7. The perception that key regional states are now essentially on board, because they understand that the US is serious this time, now appears to have spread across the Administration. The military are taking account of Saudi reluctance to allow their territory to be used, by starting to move a substantial proportion of their capability to Qatar (much kit is already in Kuwait, of course). With regard to Turkey and Jordan, and Arab states more widely, officials and pundits alike speculate that Cheney's visit will be aimed at nailing down the necessary support.

8. What remains unclear is how the US will handle the UN track, above all the inspection regime. The Administration's repeated high-profile demands for inspections suggest that the US will want to issue some sort of ultimatum, but set the bar so high that Iraq will never comply in practice (Armitage as much as stated this to the PUS in January). Our objective remains to persuade the US (who continue to say that they will consult closely with us), that they must show that they are serious about implementing the resolutions - even if only to prepare the ground properly in the international community for action if Saddam fails to comply.

9. There is clear tension between the argument for preparing international opinion (which leaves open the possibility of coercing Iraq into some real disarmament measures under threat of US military action), and the arguments for striking swiftly and with maximum surprise. There is also a fault-line between the INC-backers and others in the Administration (the latter are more likely to be troubled by the question of what happens the day after - the hawks see Chalabi and co as a viable new government). So although the goal of US policy may be ever firmer, the way to get there is not.

10. Depending on the outcome of upcoming discussion among Principals, Cheney's visit may or may not be the main vehicle for

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consulting the UK. But it would be wise to assume that by then, the US will have a reasonably clear vision, for which they will want our endorsement.

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