

US starts to think the unthinkable about Iraq

By Guy Dinmore

The consequences of US defeat in Iraq are, in the words of President George W. Bush, "unthinkable". Even so, some in the administration have started to contemplate the prospect, while other outspoken war advocates in Washington are already proclaiming failure.

US officials stress, however, that while the consequences of possible failure are being pondered, the administration is focusing on supporting the newly selected caretaker government as it tries to organise legislative elections by next January.

"There is no Plan B," a senior official said.

Still, fear that the US might be left alone to cope with conflict in Iraq has driven significant policy shifts. Washington has come to realise it must confer real authority on the new government on June 30. But officials believe that France, Germany and Russia, leading opponents of the war, have been slow to recognise this US swing towards pragmatism.

Within the administration there is still a sense that the European detractors are not unhappy to see the US in trouble.

"There's still a fair bit of satisfaction at seeing the US get its comeuppance in Iraq, especially among Europeans," the official said. "There is a failure to recognise that we are adjusting the objectives. We are far more willing to accept a degree of the unknown."

In this respect, he said Mr Bush's May 23 speech, billed as the first of several landmark addresses on Iraq, was a "disaster". The plan was essentially a rehash of position statements and failed to convey to Europe that the US was prepared to cede control in Iraq.

The long-term impact of the Iraq crisis on transatlantic relations worries Washington, and solutions are being sought as Mr Bush prepares to travel to Europe for the D-Day celebrations.

Simon Serfaty, analyst at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, was recently commissioned by someone in the administration - he does not say who - to write a paper on the impact of failure in Iraq on Europe and transatlantic relations. He defines failure as an abrupt withdrawal of most US troops while Iraq dissolves into internecine strife.

"Europe's fragile political structure of centrist Republics would be vulnerable to long-repressed cultural or nationalist instincts, with consequences for Europe's entire institutional structure," he wrote.

"Much of Europe might now view strategic separation [from the US] as a viable response to an unnecessary cultural clash with an Islamic world progressively united by the misuses of American power and the misrepresentations of Western values."

Russia and China might be viewed as alternative global strategic partners, while France and Germany would lead efforts to form a "smaller but more cohesive union of pioneer states as a rampart against the allegedly irresponsible uses of American power".

For President Vladimir Putin, "prospects of a renewed Russian empire, built around a new alliance with Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan, might prove irresistible", he adds.

That "separation" - at least from the Bush administration - has already begun, says Philip Gordon of the Brookings Institution.

"The Europeans have already dropped Bush and they are now waiting out the election. They do not want to see a strategic failure for America in Iraq, because that would be very bad for them. But at the same time they don't want to do anything that confirms the Bush approach to the world."

For some Washington conservative ideologues who wanted war on the grounds that Iraq would become a beacon of democracy for the whole region, the mission has already failed. Fouad Ajami, professor of Middle Eastern studies at Johns Hopkins University, wrote that even if Iraq survives, the "dream is dead".

"Let's face it: Iraq is not going to be America's showcase in the Arab-Muslim world," he wrote in the New York Times last week, admitting he failed to recognise that radical religious beliefs, not democracy, would fill the void left by despotism.

Failure has been defined in various ways and its repercussions in the region are already being felt. Most US Arab allies have turned down Mr Bush's invitation to come to the US during next week's G8 summit.

The Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal and Mr Bush's close identification with Israel's Ariel Sharon contributed to a "whole sourness of things", a US official conceded.

On April 13, Mr Bush laid out what he thought the "unthinkable" would mean: "Every friend of America and Iraq would be betrayed to prison and murder as a new tyranny arose. Every enemy of America and the world would celebrate, proclaiming our weakness and decadence, and using that victory to recruit a new generation of killers."

The US has contingency plans, including the evacuation of some civilians from Baghdad, in case of an uncontrollable surge in violence. However, a military spokesman said that eventuality was "both unlikely and inconsistent with the reality on the ground".

Additional reporting by Salamander Davoudi