U.S. war games target Iran

Military options range from the subtle to the extreme

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A B-2A Spirit thunders down the aging airstrip of Whiteman Air Force Base and takes off, curving east over Missouri.

More than 19 hours later, the bomber slices above central Iran and releases a 4,500-pound "bunker buster" over a complex of buildings guarded by aging missiles and obsolete guns. That, according to many experts, would be the opening gambit in a war against Iran — should the United States decide to undertake that risky option.

"Iran has been a focus of war gaming for many years both inside and outside the Pentagon, and I have been around and participated in some of that. I have 'invaded' Iran probably 20 times; I have 'bombed' Iran 30 or 40 times," said Sam Gardiner, a retired Air Force colonel who has taught strategy and military operations at the National War College.

The Bush administration is constantly reiterating its desire for a diplomatic solution to the crisis over Iran's nuclear program. But the administration emphasizes that nothing is "off the table," including military action.

"The evidence is overwhelming that plans have not only been dusted off, but they are at the White House," Gardiner said.

Other analysts are far more guarded.

"Only the president and a small number of his intelligence advisers can know at this point," said Michael Eisenstadt, director of the Military and Security Studies Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "I think this could go both ways."

What would a military strike look like?

U.S. military options range from the subtle to the extreme.

Washington could sponsor Iranian dissidents, or employ U.S. Special Forces to conduct covert operations within Iran, sabotaging nuclear facilities or assassinating key scientists. In the view of many analysts, however, such operations, while important as part of any broader military approach, are insufficient to stop Iran's nuclear program.

At the other extreme, the United States could launch a full-scale invasion. That would be enormously demanding — Iran is much larger than Iraq and is likely to put up far more resistance.

"Nobody that I know of is talking about the use of ground forces," Gardiner said.

Between those options are several airstrike scenarios, including limited attacks on Iranian military assets or carefully selected research sites, and sustained and broad strikes against political, military and scientific targets seeking not only to wipe out Iran's nuclear program but to topple its government.

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