

U.S. can calm a ruffled Turkey

On both the genocide and Iraq issues, the US can take steps to repair ties with this key NATO ally.

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Two hot-button issues have set off Turkish ire and severely strained US ties: Turkey's history with war and increased dangers to its present-day security. In both cases, it's tempting to fault Ankara's overreaction. But US lawmakers and the White House should first examine their own actions.

True, there's something galling about this NATO ally's response to the first of these issues – last week's resolution by a House committee to label the killing of 1.5 million Armenians under the Ottoman Turks as "genocide."

The measure is symbolic, without the force of law, yet Turkey threatens to pull critical logistical support for US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan if the full House passes the resolution. Turkey doesn't deny the Armenian deaths during World War I, but it does deny a systematic slaughter.

Several countries have passed legislative judgement on that historic tragedy, creating anger in Turkey – a sign of its inability to face up to the past. So what's to stop the US House from soon doing the same?

The strongest argument is that now is not the time to sacrifice an essential ally in a current war (about 70 percent of US air cargo to Iraq passes through Turkey), over an event that happened 90 years ago, however worthy the reason.

But another argument deserves mention in this context, and requires self-reflection: At a time when the world questions US moral standing, moral pronouncements from Washington ring hollow.

Much of the world wonders what has become of the US declaration of "genocide" in Darfur, about its inaction to stop Rwanda's genocide, or why it tolerates Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. It asks why more senior-level officers weren't held accountable for Abu Ghraib, about US legal treatment of terrorist suspects, and why the US still appears to find wiggle room in the definition of torture.

At this moment, it's more appropriate for US lawmakers to do what they can to restore America's moral reputation, than to comment on the historic mistakes of others or undercut US war efforts.

As for Turkey's squawk over the second issue – separatist Kurdish terrorists crossing over from northern Iraq to attack its soldiers and civilians – that, too, is cause for US self-examination.

Turkey is threatening a full-scale incursion into northern Iraq to go after Kurdish terrorists fighting for an independent homeland that would include southeast Turkey. But a wider war in Iraq is not in anyone's interest.

The pressure on the US to please Iraqi Kurds in order to help Iraq along must be overwhelming, while pleasing the Turks (who wouldn't let the US invade Iraq from the north in 2003) is secondary. Yet, the US can do more, as Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns admits.

The US needs to better balance its interest in Iraq with its interest in maintaining Turkey as a bridge-building NATO ally between Europe and the Middle East. Pressuring Iraqi Kurds to arrest terrorist leaders and close training camps is not too much to ask in return for years of US protection and advocacy.

Turkey also has work to do on both these issues. It could scrap laws that make the "genocide" description a crime and it can do more for its Kurdish minority. But Washington should start with what it can do to repair this relationship.