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Dollar Diplomacy

After taking a hard look at the poker game being played by President Bush and Saddam Hussein, Turkey, in effect, told Mr. Bush this week to ante up \$32 billion if he wants Ankara to take a seat at the table. That's serious money and the demand, which Washington is pondering, says a great deal about the tradeoffs taking place beneath all the lofty arguments about going to war with Iraq. The business of lining up reluctant governments to provide bases and support for possible military action is not exactly an exercise in Wilsonian idealism.

Should the confrontation with Iraq come to war, American military operations would be greatly aided by an invading force from Turkey. But that doesn't make the bargaining any prettier. It undercuts Washington's repeated assertions that the showdown with Iraq is about the defense of great principles and the advancement of democracy in the Middle East. With no agreement reached yesterday, Ankara has put off parliamentary action and Washington is threatening to divert troops and supplies headed for Turkey to the Persian Gulf.

Turkey's role is important, and not just because it shares a border with Iraq. Turkey is also a model of the kind of secular Muslim democracy Washington says it favors for Iraq and the wider Middle East. In the administration's efforts to line up Turkish support, it risks trampling on the very values America claims to be fighting for.

Turkey's elected leaders know that most Turks strongly oppose war with Iraq. They also know that they need Washington's help to revive their economy, press for European Union membership and stave off challenges from Turkey's coup-prone generals. They hope that a big enough economic package could make support for the war more palatable at home. The 1991 Persian Gulf war cost Turkey billions of dollars in lost trade, shut down a lucrative oil pipeline and left Ankara temporarily sheltering a million Iraqi Kurdish refugees.

Washington's bargaining with Ankara also has a Kurdish dimension, and it's a rather cynical one. Turkish leaders fear that war in Iraq could fuel demands for an independent Kurdish state, among Turkish as well as Iraqi Kurds. Iraq's Kurds now enjoy de facto autonomy, while Turkey's much larger Kurdish population still faces harsh restrictions. The Bush administration is unwisely considering a plan to allow thousands of Turkish soldiers to move into areas of Kurdish-ruled northern Iraq behind advancing American troops. Washington has a long and shameful history of encouraging Iraqi Kurds to fight Baghdad and then abandoning them to their foes. Doing so again would be a poor start on constructing a more just and democratic Iraq.

Turkey is entitled to seek economic compensation. But pledging \$32 billion to a single country could make this the most expensive alliance ever bought. Turkey would want financial guarantees even in a war against Iraq endorsed by the United Nations Security Council. Without such endorsement, and the change in Turkish public opinion it would likely bring, the price of Ankara's participation could prove exorbitant.