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Hard and Soft Power Both Frustrated in Ukraine

There's nothing like an old-fashioned expletive to add spice to a trans-Atlantic difference of opinion.

But when Victoria Nuland, the American assistant secretary of state, was caught using an expletive on an unsecure telephone line to disparage European Union policy on Ukraine, it highlighted the fact that neither Washington nor Brussels had much of a strategy for handling the crisis in the former Soviet republic.

Since the Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, ceded to Russian pressure and pulled out of a major trade pact with the European Union in November, a move that sparked mass protests, the United States and Europe have struggled to gain any influence over events in the country.

Ms. Nuland's remark in late January, which was leaked onto the Internet, was apparently directed at the Union's reluctance to impose targeted financial and travel sanctions on Mr. Yanukovich and his aides in response to their crackdown on pro-Europe demonstrations.

In another part of the conversation with the United States ambassador to Ukraine, she discussed which opposition leaders Washington wanted to join or remain on the sidelines of a proposed transitional government.

Her tone recalled the 2003 book "Of Paradise and Power," written by Ms. Nuland's husband, the historian Robert Kagan, who upset many in Brussels by asserting that "Americans are from Mars, Europeans are from Venus."

In other words: Americans are tough, Europeans are wimps. Americans take responsibility for international security, spend their hard-earned dollars on defense, and recognize the threats to freedom and stability in the world. Europeans are politically naïve, unwilling to risk their own blood and treasure, and happy to free ride on American military protection.

Proclaimed in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States by Al Qaeda and published in the year that President George W. Bush invaded Iraq, Mr. Kagan's words echoed the thinking of that time.

Things look different a decade later. The United States has been humbled by military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq that turned sour after achieving the initial objective of ousting hostile rulers.

Europe's preference for diplomacy, nation-building and the "soft power" of economic engagement no longer looks quite so illusory, though it has not necessarily proved more effective.

In the Ukrainian case, Washington and Brussels may differ on tactics but they share common objectives, American and European officials say, and neither is considering the use of force.

Both believe that Ukrainians should be free to choose closer economic integration with Europe and that Russia should not be allowed to thwart that aim with threats and sanctions.

Both are prepared to contribute to an aid package if Kiev meets conditions set by the International Monetary Fund, which Mr. Yanukovich has refused to accept.

Neither is willing to outbid the \$15 billion offered by the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin, in grants, loans and cheap gas to Ukraine. The United States and Europe have their own financial constraints. In addition, both consider Ukraine to be riddled with corruption and fear financial aid would end up in the wrong pockets.

For Mr. Putin, keeping Ukraine in Russia's economic and political orbit is a way of salvaging the power of the former Soviet Union.

Europe and the United States see Mr. Yanukovich as part of the problem rather than the solution, though Europe is less inclined to regard him as a pawn of Moscow. European officials harbor some hope that Mr. Yanukovich may be willing to preside over an orderly transition that involves constitutional reform and a fair election if he and his entourage are promised legal immunity and protection.

Diplomats say the United States is seeking to isolate Mr. Yanukovich in the belief that he can be forced from power by the protest movement — although that is not its official position.

But both parties may be deluded. Some European officials and experts in the private sector say that Mr. Yanukovich, at Mr. Putin's bidding, may just be waiting until the end of the Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, on Feb. 23 to unleash the security forces and drive the protesters out of the country's squares.

The only question in some minds is whether Mr. Putin, having worked hard to burnish Moscow's image with the Games, is ready to sacrifice it before Russia hosts a summit meeting of the Group of 8 leading economies in June.

Opposition groups have mobilized across Ukraine, including in Mr. Yanukovich's home base in the country's east, so any attempt to crush the movement could lead to serious bloodshed.

Meanwhile Moscow is pressing Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to join its exclusive Eurasian Union trade bloc, which Europe and China warn would be incompatible with global trade rules. Neither country seems eager to do so.

Some European aides fret privately about a more radical outcome in which Russia annexes Crimea, the Black Sea region in Ukraine that is home to a Russian naval base at Sebastopol. There are also fears of Russia partitioning the eastern part of Ukraine, where Russian is the primary language.

"Would the Americans intervene if that were to happen? Of course they would not," a senior European Union official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. Displaying resentment at Ms. Nuland's attitude, the official noted that the Ukrainian protesters were carrying European Union flags and not American ones.

Some European officials are also concerned that sanctions against Mr. Yanukovich would drive the Ukrainian leader firmly into the arms of Mr. Putin.

Heather Grabbe, director of the Open Society European Policy Institute, which supports political organizations in Ukraine, said the trans-Atlantic differences were more about timing.

"The United States was looking for a quick political fix," she said. "The E.U. is thinking longer-term about what a sustainable future for Ukraine might be."