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With Ukraine, Russia Drives Wedge Between EU, U.S.

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The crisis in Ukraine is giving Russia an opening to drive a wedge between the U.S. and Europe just as Western powers try to repair a struggling trade deal and decide how to bolster a cash-strapped NATO.

For years, the West has frustrated Moscow by offering former Soviet republics membership into economic and military alliances, undercutting President Vladimir Putin's ambitions to build a regional economic powerhouse to rival the European Union and expand his military reach throughout the old Eastern Bloc.

But sharp divisions between the U.S. and EU over how severely to punish Russia for intervening in Ukraine has given Moscow the chance to upend Western unity on other key geopolitical and long-term strategic issues. At the same time, with the West rejecting his approach to world affairs, Putin was in Beijing this week getting support from Chinese President Xi Jinping.

In an interview last week, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the EU is kept on "a short

leash" by the U.S.

"The real aim of the U.S. is not to let Europeans to go on their own," Lavrov told Bloomberg Television in Moscow.

Officials in Washington and Brussels insisted that they generally agree on how to limit Russia's alleged meddling in Ukraine. Late last week, the top U.S. and British diplomats announced a new threat to sanction Russian business, financial, energy and mining sectors if Moscow disrupts Sunday's presidential election in Ukraine.

"It is always a temptation to divide, to create this between the EU and U.S.," said Joao Vale de Almeida, the EU's ambassador to the U.S. "Our job is to prevent that from happening and to stay united and stay focused on what we share. ... And I think as far as Ukraine is concerned we sing the same song. We want to preserve Ukraine's territorial integrity, its sovereignty; we want to help Ukraine become a full, prosperous country; we want to create a diplomatic solution. I do not think anybody can divide us on this."

Still, simmering tensions between the U.S. and EU have been evident for months. Germany and France have shunned sectorial sanctions without first trying again to broker a dialogue between Ukraine's government and pro-Russian separatists in the country's east — a step that garnered only lukewarm U.S. support. The EU can only impose sanctions by unanimous agreement from all 28 of its member states, and the Obama administration for months has pushed Europe to embrace U.S. plans for tougher penalties against Moscow.

Officials said Putin maintains an amiable relationship with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. France, meanwhile, is moving ahead with a $1.2 billion contract to sell warships to Russia.

The strain became clear in February, shortly after the Ukraine unrest peaked and the government in Kiev was overturned. A bugged phone call posted on YouTube with Russian subtitles captured U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland dismissing the EU with a common expletive in frustration over Europe's pace in helping Ukraine. Nuland later apologized, and the State Department described the incident as "a new low in Russian tradecraft."

The EU has been far more cautious about sanctioning Russia's economic and energy sectors, in part because of longstanding trade between Moscow and European nations.

Europe is Russia's largest trading partner and therefore has huge sway over Russia's shaky economy. Yet some nations are reluctant to undercut their own financial stability and endanger their main source of energy by imposing harsh penalties against Moscow.

But leaders of Western powers also are eager to finalize a stalled trans-Atlantic trade agreement that will bring the EU and U.S. closer.

The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership is designed to boost trade in some of the EU's newest member nations, including Romania, Bulgaria and a half-dozen other former Soviet-allied states that Putin has wanted to bring into the regional Eurasian Union economic alliance that he is trying to create.

Putin hopes such an alliance would rival the EU. He has sought to lure ex-Soviet nations

into it with cheap energy and loans, while also expanding Russia's military presence in these countries. Ukraine has been central to Putin's vision of a Eurasian Union, and he offered the former pro-Russian government in Kiev $15 billion last year to drop a trade accord with the EU.

That set off the current unrest in Ukraine, which is not a member of the EU but has sought to boost its own sagging economy by increased ties with the West.

"Given the current challenge faced in the Ukraine, I can see where Russia would be concerned about it," said U.S. House of Representatives' Jim Costa, who has been pushing for the EU-U.S. trade deal. "Their economy, and their whole effort to put together a federation, is crumbling before Putin's eyes."

Putin also has chafed at NATO extending membership to former Soviet republics. Russia does not want NATO to encroach on its borders, where Western troops could be deployed for military exercises. Former Soviet states that become NATO members also would buy most military equipment from other NATO countries instead of remaining dependent on Russia for hardware.

Lavrov said Russia would be "categorically against" Ukraine joining NATO. NATO now is debating what its responsibilities should be, and how much time and effort should be used to respond to Russia. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has described the crisis in Ukraine as "a wake-up call" to member nations.

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