In the Middle East, terrorists are making a comeback. And with the exit of U.S. troops from Iraq and Washington’s continued absence in Syria, the momentum appears to be in their favor. The RAND Corporation reports that since 2010 the number of jihadist groups in the region has increased by 58 percent, the number of extremist fighters has doubled, and the number of attacks by al Qaeda affiliates has tripled. Recent events, meanwhile, provide little cause for optimism. In Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), an al Qaeda offshoot, has fought its way nearly to Baghdad.

The growth of such groups has not merely been a product of their brutality. Studies [1] conducted in the past decade have demonstrated [2] that they use carefully cultivated victim narratives to play on intense popular frustrations, especially during crises of governance. Al Qaeda is a case in point: from the beginning, Osama bin Laden emphasized the humiliation of Muslims at the hands of Western oppressors and called on his followers to reclaim their dignity as God’s chosen people. ISIS has invoked similar themes in Iraq, harnessing Sunni anger at the Shia government in Baghdad. Extremism in defense of Islam is often an ontological phenomenon, attracting people seeking to assert their identity and self-worth.

This new wave of terrorist activity, moreover, is not an isolated trend; rather, it portends a new era for international security, one that could be called an age of grievance. Increasingly, the driving forces of world politics are not merely geopolitical but psychological, as well.

This new dynamic is playing out for two primary reasons. First, the context of geopolitical rivalry has changed. Several trends -- including the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons, global economic interdependence, the declining utility of territorial aggression, and the strengthening of borders -- have lessened the value of realpolitik. Meanwhile, in the absence of geopolitical strife, cosmopolitan ideals, promoted through mass media, have worn away at
indigenous cultures and values. In many countries, particularly in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, perceptions of cultural erosion have given rise to reactionary grievances.

Today, the world’s major security risks stem from the wrath of societies or groups that feel alienated or left behind by the emerging liberal order. Moving forward, most security threats will issue from a wounded people determined to overcome perceived humiliations and recapture their self-worth.

This thread links events in Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan with recent developments in eastern Europe. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s power plays in Ukraine reflect years of accumulated fury at the West’s dismissive treatment of Russia. The country’s increasingly assertive nationalists want Russia to reclaim its greatness [3]; in turn, they portray the United States as a crass and imperialistic global hegemon. As one reporter put it [4] after meeting with Putin in May: “It’s bitter. And it’s personal.”

Like his counterparts in the Middle East and South Asia, Putin’s narrative of humiliation finds receptive ears because of the stagnation and infirmities of the system he heads. Grievance narratives have the strongest hold over societies that have been unable to keep up with the demands of globalization. Russians know that their country is one of the world’s most corrupt, that its public institutions are dysfunctional, and that its economy remains crippling dependent on natural resource exports. In a 2011 survey, 43 percent of Russians said [5] that their country was on the wrong track and 80 percent admitted that they didn’t know where the government was trying to lead it. These worries have fed fear, frustration, and demands for recognition: In a 2012 poll, 73 percent of Russians said that their country deserved to be more respected, and 72 percent had a favorable impression of Putin, the figure fighting to win Russia that respect.

THE POLITICS OF RAGE

Grievances, of course, are nothing new in international politics. Moreover, power-based calculations of national interest are hardly disappearing; Russian adventurism in eastern Europe is about power and geopolitics, too. But grievance narratives are becoming a newly dominant force, one that will shape the way that national leaders perceive their interests. After all, a different set of Russian leaders could conceivably serve their fundamental interests by engaging with Europe rather than confronting it.

It’s the same story, more or less, wherever the hallmarks of grievance politics appear [6]. The typical narrative has a few central themes. It views history as a contest between forces of good and evil. It contends that a true people, some honored nation or group, was once great and has been brought low by conspiracies of evildoers, usually immigrant outsiders. It warns that cosmopolitan influences are undermining the values of said true people, and it usually promises that a charismatic leader will guide those people out of the despoiled present to reclaim an idealized past.

Popular movements that reflect such ideas tend to arise in societies or communities where a few specific preconditions are met. They flourish, for example, when the process of modernization goes wrong in ways that stall societal progress: when a group of technocratic leaders embarks on an agenda of Westernization, and fails; when the specific dynamics of modernization create especially sharp class, social, and religious cleavages; and after a country or group loses, or believes it has lost, a major conflict.
Many of these factors have become evident in China, whose leaders have internalized a narrative [7] of humiliation at the hands of the West and see a need to vigorously, even violently, recapture the Middle Kingdom’s lost glory. Evidence of such grievances is everywhere, from the media to popular culture to textbooks to online diatribes among radical netizens. The scholar John Fitzgerald, of Swinburne University, argues that the roots of modern Chinese nationalism lie in a resentment-fueled “quest for dignity.” [8] David Shambaugh, a China expert at George Washington University, has called this [9] the “aggrieved nationalism” of Chinese history. And now, with China’s breakneck growth giving way to complaints about governance, frustrations and scapegoating are likely to mount.

Nationalist grievances are alive and well among traditional U.S. allies, too, including Japan [10] and India [11]. Even in western Europe, the rise of the right-wing nationalist political parties, which has culminated in their unprecedented performance [12] in recent parliamentary elections, can be attributed to similar circumstances. To explain this nationalist turn, observers have pointed to a specific blend [13] of resentments. Yet many aspects of such ideologies flow directly out of the standard grievance narrative -- a good and honorable people under siege, the perception of cultural threats [14], corrupt and ineffectual governing institutions, and so on.

COURAGE UNDER FIRE

At their core, grievance narratives reflect a paradox: an afflicted group’s thirst to become a member of the very club it rails against. This contradiction is more than a curiosity; it creates crushing dilemmas for U.S. strategy, which must somehow confront revisionist ideologies without the sort of confrontation that would only feed their narratives.

U.S. policymakers ought to respond to this challenge with patience, restraint, and a confidence that time is broadly on their side. Most people want security and prosperity, and radical movements offer neither. Grievance narratives will tend to fling themselves at the global order until they burn themselves out, generating both international and domestic backlash. The international system will be bursting with psychodramas over the coming decade, and Washington’s challenge will be to steer clear of most of them. The trick will be to shore up international institutions and norms that can help prevent chaos in the meantime -- anything that can help mitigate financial crises or prevent violent conflicts.

Even if countries don’t behave like their chessboard-maneuvering predecessors, geopolitical rivalries are still here to stay. Deprived of traditional wars as a venting mechanism, states and groups will turn increasingly to shadow aggression [15], in the form of covert action, economic aggression [16], terrorism, cyberattacks, and resource wars. Russia’s actions in Georgia and Ukraine are a preview of the sort of persistent, gray-area belligerence that can be a perfect tool for a resentment-fueled people uninterested in all-out war. The great risk here, of course, is escalation, and so Washington will need to find ways of cooling tensions before they boil over.

As conflicts heat up, it would be a cardinal error to mistake the politics of humiliation for cold-eyed realism. Direct confrontation would only validate the claims of aggrieved radicals. Washington must therefore be prepared to absorb plenty of insults and provocations in the years to come. In an era of shadow conflicts, moreover, resilience against attack will be a more direct route to security than deterrence. Preparedness in the face of a constant stream of attacks will be essential -- not only to preserve the safety of Americans but also to dampen the effects of the attacks and thus forestall excessive reactions.

Such a strategy will be hard for Washington to swallow. Americans prefer direct action. They remain hostage to the doctrine of credibility. A national security strategy for the age of grievance, however, is all about balancing various
dilemmas. Bold and decisive U.S. leadership will still be critical -- it’s just that the issues demanding leadership, from international financial stability to cyberthreats, will demand slow, steady progress that won’t always be satisfying. As U.S. strategy confronts an era that demands patience and restraint, then, it remains an open question whether Washington is up to the challenge.