

Colloguy
*The domino theory,
strategic lying, &
Turkey's regional influence*

**John J.
Mearsheimer***

**John J. Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science and the co-director of the Program on International Security Policy at the University of Chicago, where he has taught since 1982. He is the leading proponent of offensive realism. His latest book, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth about Lying in International Politics* was published in 2011, and has been translated into ten different languages.*

CI: *Dr. Mearsheimer, I will first of all ask you to brief us on the current dynamics of power politics. You titled your most famous book 'The Tragedy of Great Power Politics'. Looking to recent years, what is the 'tragedy' in global affairs? You said in your book that the essence of the tragedy of international politics is the security dilemma. Do you still believe this?*

Mearsheimer: Well, my argument is based on the notion that countries can never be sure of one another's intentions. They have to assume the worst case scenario; this means that you can have countries that are the status-quo powers, but are not interested in using force to change the status-quo. Deep down, they have benign intentions. But because no one can figure out what the other side's intentions are, states assume the worst, and therefore they engage in security competitions, sometimes even in wars. The root of the problem is that it is impossible to know the intentions of other states, and that is the great tragedy of power politics. States have no choice but to compete with other states, simply because they cannot know their intentions. It may be the case that you have a state with benign intentions, but the system of international politics is designed for competition.

CI: *With regard to Eisenhower's "domino theory", many in the expert community believed that the theory acquired new meaning with the Arab Spring. But this year's events sug-*

gest something different, more like an "anti-domino" effect, where the great hope for democratization seems unachievable in the post-revolution Arab countries. What is your opinion on this, from a realist's perspective? Do you agree with the argument that the Arab Spring has been unsuccessful?

Mearsheimer: The Arab Spring has been successful in some cases, and unsuccessful in another cases. Circumstances vary greatly from country to country. It was obviously very successful in Tunisia, and I think it has also been successful in Egypt. It has been a bumpy process there, but I think ultimately it has been successful. Bahrain is a case where the revolution was unsuccessful, and that was because the Saudi government with the U.S. quietly supporting them worked to suppress the protesters in Bahrain, and so there the movement failed. In Syria, it looked initially as if you were going to see a situation that duplicated what happened in Egypt - it looked like Assad was going to be overthrown much the way Mubarak was, and that you would end up with an ultimately stable democracy in Syria, which would make the region more peaceful. But events did not unfold like that, because it has been difficult to topple Assad, who in some important ways cannot be compared with Mubarak. So my byline would be that there is no question that the Arab Spring spread all over the Middle East in domino-like fashion. But

There is no question that the Arab Spring spread all over the Middle East in domino-like fashion.

in terms of how it played itself out in each country? That varied greatly, and that is hardly surprising. I would also note that it is not over with yet, and it is very hard to tell what the end result will be in Egypt – and the same with Libya. You had an Arab Spring uprising in Libya and the Europeans and Americans came to the aid of the rebels and helped overthrow the Gaddafi government. Now the question is, will Libya become a moderate democracy or not? Or will civil war eventually break out? It is hard to answer that question at this point in time.

CI: *Henry A. Kissinger warned in his op-ed that the Arab Spring developments represent a pre-Westphalian notion of sovereignty, and as such could fundamentally change the notion of the nation state. Do you agree?*

Mearsheimer: I don't think the Arab Spring is going to have any effect on the nation state. I believe that nationalism is the most powerful ideology on the planet, and as a result the nation state is here to stay. I don't see the Arab Spring challenging the nation state or undermining nationalism in any way. I think the Arab Spring all

1 Henry Kissinger, "Meshing realism and idealism in Middle East", 2 August 2012, Washington Post

about is bringing more democracy to the Middle East, and what that means is that those nation states are not going to go away. They are either going to become more democratic as we have seen in Egypt, or not, as in Bahrain. But the basic nation state form is not going to change at all as a result of the Arab Spring.

CI: *In your latest book 'Why leaders lie: the truth about lying in international politics', you argue that "strategic lying is a useful tool of statecraft". I would like to ask about the act of lying in the peace negotiation process; we have seen several such cases in the Caucasus. In the negotiations, conflicting parties sometimes accuse one other of opposing peace settlements and lying to their own people. The question is: when there does not appear to be any real benefit as a result of the lie, does this count as 'strategic lying'?*

Mearsheimer: Leaders can lie to other leaders, to foreign audiences, and to their own people. It is obvious that if you are lying to another country, you

I don't see the Arab Spring challenging the nation state or undermining nationalism in any way.

are doing it for strategic purposes. But you can also lie to your own people for strategic purposes - my favorite example of that is John F. Kennedy

during the Cuban Missile Crisis. As you know, Kennedy was desperate to end the Cuban Missile Crisis, because it was the closest the United States and the Soviet Union ever came to nuclear war. Kennedy knew that this crisis was extremely dangerous, and he was fighting to reach a deal with the Soviets when at the last moment Khrushchev said that if the Soviets were to take the very medium range ballistic missiles out of Cuba, then the Americans had to take the U.S.-built Jupiter missiles out of Turkey. Kennedy understood that he could not tell the Europeans, and certainly not the American public, that he was cutting this deal, for it was politically unacceptable in the United States, within the NATO alliances, and especially Turkey. So, Kennedy told Khrushchev that he was going to lie, and would deny that the deal had been cut. But

George Bush did not lie to the American public because he wanted to make money for himself or anything like that.

Khrushchev should understand that the deal had been cut and Kennedy was not back-tracking. Thus Kennedy was lying to the American people, not for selfish purposes, not because he was evil, but because he thought it was imperative to end the Cuban Missile Crisis. And the only way he could do that was to hide the terms of his deal with the Soviets: it was a strategic lie. In my book, I have included stories about how the Bush adminis-

It is obvious that if you are lying to another country, you are doing it for strategic purposes.

tration lied in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq war. The reasons they did so is that they believed that it was essential for the United States to go to war with Iraq and to topple Saddam Hussein. But at the same time, they fully recognized that the American people were not enthusiastic at all about fighting at another war, because we had just finished a war in Afghanistan. So in order to get the American people motivated for a fight against Iraq, they had to exaggerate the threat. They had to make the case that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction that he was building up to support Osama bin Laden. In the end they told a handful of lies, but not for selfish reasons. George Bush did not lie to the American public because he wanted to make money for himself or anything like that. He did it because he thought it was in American national interest; it was a strategic lie. It was a blunder of the first order. Don't misunderstand me, but it was a blunder of first order. But it was not done for selfish purposes. So, what happens in lots of countries is that you get leaders who take over and come to the conclusion that the public does not know what is best for the country, but they as the leader do know – and in such cases, the leader believes it is necessary to engage in a deception campaign to gain public support

for potentially controversial policies.

CI: *Looking to the case of Turkey, most local and international commentators are hopeful that Turkey is the region's rising star and will become a regional leader, able to manage the situation in the Middle East. At this point, what do you feel that Turkey is lacking if it wants to become a 'regional power'?*

Mearsheimer: Well, I think Turkey is a regional power. The question is how *much* power Turkey has, and how a big leadership role it will play in the region. Five years ago it looked like Turkey was on its way to becoming one of the most influential, if not the most influential, countries in the Middle East. Turkey had very good relations with Israel, very good relations Iran, Iraq, Syria, and it looked like Turkish foreign policy was working like magic. But we have seen a series of events beyond Turkey's control, and have put Turkey in a position where its relations with Iran, Israel, Iraq and Syria have deteriorated. Turkey no longer wields as much influence in the region as it did five years ago. Again, that is largely due to forces outside of its control, and I do not see any change in that situation in the near future. I think that Turkey, like the United States, is facing serious and very complicated problems in this region, problems that have no simple solution. If we look at Syria, is there a simple way to solve the crisis or to end the civil war

The question is how much power Turkey has, and how a big leadership role it will play in the region.

in Syria? I think the answer is no, and I think this is going to cause Turkey problems in the years ahead as well. We already see that happening with all the refugees that have left Syria and come to Turkey, and we see the resurrection of the Kurdish problem. Thus Turkey is facing a whole host of problems today that were not in play five years ago.

Colloquy conducted by Lamiya Adilgizi, Co-Editor of CI, September 2012, Istanbul, Turkey

