An Interview with Craig Kennedy
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Ian Bremmer is president of Eurasia Group, the global political risk consultancy, and author of The J Curve: A New Way to Understand Why Nations Rise and Fall. Willis Sparks is an analyst in Eurasia Group’s Global Macro Practice, specializing in transnational political risk issues and U.S. electoral politics.

Brown Journal of World Affairs: Your recent book The J Curve drew quite a bit of acclaim. Let’s start with some of the concepts from that book. What is the J curve? What does it tell us?

Ian Bremmer: The J curve is an effort to explain the relationship between two variables I consider important—one being a country’s openness and a second being its stability. Openness is the extent to which an individual citizen of a country can communicate effectively and freely with other members of that society and internationally—this is also the ease of physical travel, transfer of capital and ideas, and so on. Stability is the willingness and capacity of an existing set of leaders to implement policies in the incidence of external shock. By “external shock,” I mean any unexpected event that undermines the political and economic status quo—a tsunami in Indonesia, the assassination of a prominent Lebanese politician, a terrorist attack in Moscow, a flood of Zimbabwean refugees into South Africa, a secessionist crisis in Mexico. The relationship between openness and stability is important, significant, and casual. And when you look at that relationship, you actually see something that looks like a J.

In other words, some countries are stable because they’re open like the United States and Canada and others are stable because they’re closed like North Korea and
The J curve

**Willis Sparks:** You cannot put two states on the same J curve. Every country has its own J curve, because every country has its own unique political, economic, social, and religious circumstances. The entire curve can shift up if, for some external reason, the entire country can become more stable for every level of openness. There is an important distinction between movement of the entire curve and movement along the curve.

This is not to say that these are the only two things that matter. There are lots of other variables that matter—the importance of individuals, bureaucratic politics, et cetera. The model is a simplification.

**Journal:** How does a leadership transition in an authoritarian government affect the curve?

**Bremmer:** It depends. If the leader is extraordinarily authoritarian—totalitarian—a leadership transition may not affect the country’s curve at all. If a leader dies and the people do not know about it because they have no access to communication or infor-
mation whatsoever, nothing will happen. I would expect that if Kim Jong-il were to
die tomorrow, the North Korean people would not find out for some time—at least
not until the North Korean ruling elite feel they have sufficient control of the situation.
So it is unlikely that such a transition would affect the curve at all.

A state which is somewhat less totalitarian is under much more danger when a
leadership suddenly collapses. So if President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan died, for
example, Pakistan’s military would likely assume control of the government. But do
they really have the capacity to ensure the monopoly over coercive authority for the
long-term?

Journal: It appears likely that Raúl Castro will succeed Fidel in Cuba. Is there any hope
that Cuba can move towards the right of the curve, towards greater openness, during
this period of succession?

Bremmer: There is quite a bit of hope. We have to recognize a couple things. First, no
one who replaces Fidel will have the legitimacy in the eyes of the Cuban people or the
charisma that Fidel has. Automatically, the political capital available to that leadership
will be reduced. Second, Hugo Chavez sees himself as the rightful heir to Fidel’s throne of
leading the “revolution” in Latin America. Chavez may be so busy playing Castro—being
the leader of the extreme left in Latin America—that Raúl will be somewhat forgotten.
If I were Raúl in that situation, I would do everything possible to ensure that I have
the economic wherewithal to maintain control locally. And that may well mean taking
a softer tact vis-à-vis the United States in terms of allowing, for example, remittances
to come across the border, allowing in some more tourism, et cetera.

So on the one hand, Raúl may be losing political capital, but on the other hand,
the entire J curve may shift up because Raúl will have the opportunity to improve
Cuba’s economic situation.

Keep in mind that many Cuban-Americans are much more up in arms about
Fidel than Cuba per se. And the Cuban-American community is getting older and a
lot of young Cuban-Americans are already thinking about how they can start their own
businesses in Cuba—some of them are already doing so through Europe. And so as
a consequence, Fidel’s death is likely to lead to some fairly significant shifts in Cuba.
There is a much greater likelihood of a dramatic change there than in a country like
Turkmenistan, which is not nearly as affected by the immediate geopolitical environ-
ment because its political leadership has largely succeeded in isolating the country.

Sparks: Over the next several years, Cuba will have two transitions. First, there is a
transition in which there will no longer be a president named Fidel. Second, there is
a transition in which there will no longer be a president named Castro. The second transition will mark a shift away from the older generation of revolutionary leaders toward one that might be less bound by fidelity to ideology. That transition may be even more important than the first.

Journal: Under Vladimir Putin it appears as if Russia is moving back up the left side of the curve. How will the upcoming election determine what direction Russia will go in?

Bremmer: Almost not at all, because Putin will have nearly complete control over the election. We need to recognize that some countries—if they want to be economically successful—need to integrate into the international community, globalize, and have more access to international capital, et cetera. China and India are countries like that. There are other countries that, if they want to become wealthier, merely need to—at least for the short term—pull more resources out of the ground. Russia is such a country. Russia has moved from being an emerging market to being a petrostate.

Putin recognizes that there is a great deal of support within Russia to take a tough line against the West because of the perceived slight or humiliation at the West’s hands in the last decade and a half. As a consequence, Russia has recently been much more intentionally provocative in their stance internationally. This decrease in openness internationally has meant that Russia has moved along to the left of the curve. At the same time, the entire Russian curve has shifted upwards because of the money available from high resource prices.

Both those things have conspired to put Putin in very strong position domestically and he has made it very clear that he will have a great deal of say over the 2008 election. While I don’t personally believe that Putin will be the next president, I think the likelihood is extremely great that he will be a Deng Xiaoping figure, who is actually standing in the background and manipulating a great deal of the political power in Russia. So I don’t see much change there at all after the upcoming election.

Journal: What does the J curve tell us about Pakistan, a country with an authoritarian leader who is unable to assert himself in many areas, yet is able to stay in power?

Bremmer: I would not say Pakistan is a failed state. In many ways, I would say Pakistan looks a little like Russia in that Russia has little control over the North Caucuses, much less Chechnya. Now Pakistan is no way near as consolidated as Russia is today, and there is much more meaningful opposition to the government in Pakistan. But outside of the Northwest Frontier Province, Musharraf and the military really do control the
territories of Pakistan. Between upcoming elections this year and pressure from the United States to go after al-Qaeda and the Taliban operating in Pakistan, life has become more difficult for Musharraf. The likelihood that Musharraf faces an untimely demise is higher this year than it has been at any point since 9/11. And were that to occur, there could be a messy transition. There is no question that there would immediately be emergency control by a military government, but how long that government would stay in control is an open question. Pakistan is definitely at the left side of the curve, but if Musharraf suddenly lost power, likely by assassination, the potential for significant instability would be quite high.

Sparks: And part of Musharraf’s weakness, too, is that he depends on religious parties for a lot of his political capital, which has been an on and off relationship. Whether Musharraf is able to build enough of a coalition to go forward with elections and survive politically is very much in question.

Journal: How should the international community handle nuclear proliferation, especially with respect to North Korea and Iran?

Bremmer: Well, once a country like North Korea has proliferated, it is over. But it was fairly clear that economic sanctions were not going to prevent the North Koreans from developing nuclear weapons. A lot of people say sanctions were effective—they were effective at irritating Kim Jong-il. Freezing his bank accounts in the Bank of Macau accomplished that. Let’s face it, it was under a regime of rather intense international sanctions that North Korea reprocessed nuclear fuel, tested ballistic missiles—though unsuccessfully—and ended up actually testing a nuclear weapon. They have nuclear weapons. The United States has largely caved. U.S. official policy may be complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization, but there is nobody in Washington DC right now who believes that is a realistic policy. The realistic policy is trying to ensure that North Korea does not aid other proliferators and trying to maintain regional stability. The United States, in that regard, is moving closer to Chinese policy on North Korea. If the United States had been more concerned about North Korea’s gaining nuclear weapons, the United States could have taken many steps to destabilize the North Korean government, for example by supporting a South Korea Sunshine Policy or through covert means. I am not suggesting that actively destabilizing North Korea, given the refugee issue and given North Korea’s potential to respond irrationally, would have been a smart policy, but it was an option.

In Iran, it is a slightly different story. Iran has a much less opaque, more porous society. One thing you can do is to crash Iran’s J curve, which would discourage the
government from developing nuclear weapons. The best way to crash Iran's J curve is not by imposing economic sanctions, because it is probably impossible to cut off their oil exports from the entire world. Some country would still buy Iranian oil regardless of international economic sanctions. Since 60 percent of Iran's money comes from energy, you should try to crash the price of oil. That means the United States should start actively using the strategic petroleum reserve and convince the Saudis to overproduce; this would substantially reduce the revenue Iran earns from exporting oil. Barring that, the Iranians look like they are very likely to continue their nuclear program. The United States or another country can go after their nuclear program—clearly surgical strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities would delay the Iranians for a few years from developing nuclear weapons. It would also help consolidate the existing Iranian regime however, because Iranians will likely respond to an attack by rallying to their government.

Thus, I think the J curve helps you understand that the very policies that allow you deal with the proliferation issue in the short term can actually lead to a stronger regime in the long term. Policy makers have to balance exactly the sorts of tradeoffs elsewhere that we're seeing in Iran.

Sparks: Also, let me just say, it is very difficult to use openness to achieve a short-term policy goal. North Korea already has nuclear weapons and Iran is close. Openness is a much longer-term process. Over the longer term, openness is a useful policy tool, but not with something that has a one to three year timeline. Also, in Iran, the government may not be popular with the Iranian people, but the nuclear program is. So does openness really help you deal with that problem? It doesn't really.

Journal: What are the effects of sanctions?

Bremmer: Let's not consider sanctions that are just rhetoric like the Iran Sanctions Act, which stops U.S. companies from investing in the country but not anyone else. Effective sanctions do two things. First, they take the entire curve of a country and they shift it down. Two, they move the country to the left of the curve—they further isolate the country. If you are putting sanctions against countries on the right-hand side of the curve, those sanctions will almost always be effective, because these are countries that don't want to be isolated and they are already more open (and therefore vulnerable) to changes in the world beyond their borders. They will almost always punish a country. Both of those things are hurting the ability of that government to be in power, so they want those sanctions gone. If you are a country on the left-hand side, they move the individual government up the left-hand side of the curve by creating more isolation. This is why Cuba to a certain extent needs sanctions: because it allows them to keep the
outside out. The North Koreans certainly don’t want foreign direct investment coming in. So if you are a foreign government thinking about applying direct sanctions against left-hand–side states—and most sanctions are against left-hand–sided states—then you have to think about which of those two movements are most significant. And the further the country is to the left-hand side of the curve, the harder it gets because the curve becomes steeper the further the country is to the left. So if you are a country that is really isolated and really totalitarian, all but the most extraordinary sanctions are likely to be completely ineffectual. We saw that with North Korea: it was only when the Chinese threatened to cut them off completely—which would have been precipitously bad for North Korea—that they were prepared to move. Sanctions against Iran may be more effective, but they may need a long time. We don’t have a long time with the Iranian government.

*Journal:* How can the international community aid democratization?

**Bremmer:** It is not clear to me that the international community wants to aid democratization. Depending on the kind of country you have, democratization can lead to unfortunate outcomes. We saw that in Algeria, and democratic elections in Saudi Arabia tomorrow will lead to an outcome—the election of Islamists—that no one wants in the international community.

If what you are asking is what the international community can do to aid openness and stability, which might mean democratization, then you are talking about a long process that first requires the educational and economic basis for that kind of opening. Dubai did it, Singapore did it. This has usually been done in small countries, where you can shift the entire curve up through massive infusions of money. If per capita income is $30,000, it is a lot easier to get up the right side of the curve and not notice that dip as you move towards great openness. Iraq is going to be a lot harder than East Germany. The fact is that the United States and international community do not have sufficient money or political will to wait the 10 to 20 years it is going to take. The same is true in Afghanistan. People ask who lost Russia. Russia went down to the bottom of the curve after the Soviet collapse, the international community lost interest, and then Russia went right back up to the top left. This is very analogous to Iraq and Afghanistan.

**Sparks:** It is very important not to confuse democratization and openness. The Dubai and Singapore examples are very important—Singapore is a managed democracy at best and Dubai is not a democracy by any definition. But both are incredibly open societies.
**Journal:** Are there any lessons from the J curve on how to handle Iraq?

**Bremmer:** There are two choices. The United States must either take the pain and understand it is going to take decades, billions and billions of dollars, and lots of U.S. soldiers to build a stable, open, and democratic Iraq, or the United States must realize it does not have that capacity and implement what you hope is a benign authoritarian regime as quickly as possible. The “in between” doesn’t work, and the United States has found that to their peril the past couple of years. A country can be stable because it is closed or stable because it is open. The countries in between, those that are partially open, are inherently less stable because the tensions that exist between those elements of society pulling it in opposite directions along the J curve create conflict and undermine the political, economic, and social status quo.

**Journal:** Will the spread of communications technology undermine authoritarian regimes around the world?

**Bremmer:** I think it can. There is no question that the communications revolution is happening exponentially quickly, and the ability of individuals to communicate in a relatively cost-free environment in ways that are difficult to monitor and contain is growing extraordinarily. But we should not underestimate the coercive authority of an effectively-run authoritarian state to isolate their community. In 2007, the average North Korean citizen is just as cut off from the international community as he or she was in 1987. Given the pace of globalization, that is quite something. In China, there are many working very effectively to prevent the average Chinese from googling Taiwan, googling democracy, or checking out the Falun Gong; but it is getting harder to cut people off from the rest of the world because of technology.

**Sparks:** One example of the effects of technology is Joseph Estrada’s government in the Philippines, which fell in 2001 because the protesters coordinated their protests by text messages. The Chinese government is going to have to spend enormous time, energy, and resources managing this problem.

**Journal:** What are the limitations of the J curve?

**Bremmer:** First, openness and stability are the only two variables that matter on the J curve. However, there are in reality lots of other relevant variables—the importance of individuals, bureaucratic politics, et cetera. The model is a simplification. For example,
Nelson Mandela, as an individual, was extremely important in determining the future direction of his country. A great part of South Africa’s success during its transition from apartheid has to do with the historical uniqueness of Nelson Mandela. And I can say the same thing of Gorbachev, Gandhi, and others. But there’s nothing in the J curve that talks about the individual.

It would be hubris to say that I have written a book which has determined the way the world works. I think what I’ve done is created a model which has some pretty significant explanatory power about two variables that matter. And if you actually agree with the argument it leads to some pretty significant, and in some cases, counterintuitive policy implications.

If you want to apply political science to the real world, you had better be aware of the limitations of your model. As Yogi Berra said, “In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is.” That’s a nice way to look at the J curve.