

## Description

In a speech on May 26, Secretary of State Antony Blinken outlined the Biden administration's policy toward China, which he characterized as the only nation with the will to alter the international order while relying on an increasing amount of economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so. According to Secretary Blinken, the US will concentrate on influencing Beijing's strategic environment to further its goals. In this period of strategic rivalry, the US will use the three-word strategy of investing, aligning, and competing. The Indo-Pacific region has been designated as the US's top priority theater, while the Middle East and North Africa are significant regions where the rivalry will play out.

In this podcast, Jonathan invited Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan, Chairman, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore and former ambassador and Singapore's Minister of Foreign Affairs. In today's episode, they discuss the influence of the US-China Competition in the Southeast Asia (SEA) region. They also discuss the difference between the Gulf and Southeast Asia regarding people, culture, religion, and perspective in this geopolitical competition. Moreover, Ambassador Bilahari states that the SEA region welcomes these extra-national powers within the region as they help countries' economic growth and maintain the balance of power in the region. Lastly, Ambassador Kausikan provides some advice to Gulf countries regarding US-China geopolitics.

## Key Takeaways

- The influence of US-China Competition in the SEA region
- Comparison between the Gulf region and the SEA region
- The China-Iran relationship in geopolitics
- The role of extra-national powers in the power balance in East Asia and SEA regions
- Advice and recommendations to Gulf Countries

## Quotes

*The US-China competition is competition within a system, one system of which the US and China are both vital and irreplaceable parts in a global system - Bilahari*

*We do welcome all external powers but don't follow their interests - Bilahari*

*China has good relations with everybody in the MENA region, but it is not a sustainable position over the long run, and the Chinese know it and are not quite sure what to do about it - Bilahari*

## Featured in this Episode

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## **Bilahari Kausikan**

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## Transcript

**Jonathan Fulton:** Welcome to the China-MENA podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Fullerton, a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a political scientist at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Great power competition has become an underlying feature of nearly everything in international politics. The U.S. designated Russia and China as its primary challenges, and Russia's war in Ukraine underscores Moscow's threat to global order. However, over the immediate and long term, Washington is focused on Beijing. Secretary of State Antony Blinken gave a speech on May 26 outlining the Biden administration's approach to China, which he described as the only country with the intent to reshape the international order and increase the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. He said the U.S. will focus on shaping the strategic environment around Beijing to advance U.S. interests. Using a three-word strategy invest, align and compete in this era of strategic competition. The U.S. has identified the Indo-Pacific as the priority theater, but the Middle East and North Africa are other important theaters of competition. China's interests in China have increased substantially, and the U.S. remains a pivotal actor in the region. The rivalry is putting regional countries in a very uncomfortable position to help us think about navigating tensions and the US-China relationship. I'm joined by Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan, a former ambassador at large, and Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Before this role, he served as a second permanent secretary and then permanent secretary of the Foreign Ministry. He has held a variety of appointments during his career, including Singapore's permanent representative to the United Nations and as an ambassador to the Russian Federation. Currently, Ambassador

Kazakhstan serves as the Chairman of the Middle East Institute, which is affiliated with the National University of Singapore. Hillary, welcome to the show.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** Hello, Jonathan. Glad to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Of course. So, look, before we start talking about the Middle East, I'd like to hear your perspective just in general on US-China competition. Singapore, of course, has a lot of experience in managing this complicated bilateral relationship. How does this affect the regional landscape for folks in Southeast Asia?

**Bilahari Kausikan:** Well, it affects everything because we are a strategic crossroads that has for centuries been the locus for great power competition. I mean, the cost of great powers changes over time. But there has never been a time where, you know, we're not the South Pacific, which for very long periods was just left alone. One thing I have to make clear, I have always been puzzled. Amir, a political scientist you read the same things up to very recently. There were a lot of articles appearing in various journals that I think ought to have known better. Talking about the return of great power competition. And since when did you ever go away? There has only been a short and historically rather abnormal period where great power competition was marked by the dominance of the U.S. That's maybe from the fall of the Berlin Wall to somewhere, you know, maybe the global financial crisis. But that's abnormal, period. We have returned to a period of more historical normalcy. All right. But we have to understand that the nature of our competition has changed. US-China competition is often called a new Cold War. I think that's a very intellectually lazy trope that fundamentally misrepresents the nature of the competition. The US competition with the Soviet Union was different. The US and Soviet Union each led to separate systems that were connected only very gently. At the margins, there was competition between the two systems. The US-China competition is competition within a system, one system of which the US and China are both vital and irreplaceable parts and is a global system. The rest of us in different ways are all part of this system and we are all connected. And the US and China, most of all by supply chains of scope, of identity, of a complexity never before seen in world history. And that's what distinguishes 21st-century interdependence from earlier periods of independence. I don't think it's very likely that this is going to bifurcate into two separate systems as existed between the US and the Soviet Union. There have been partial bifurcation and some considerable bifurcation in certain specific domains. I think the Internet is largely bifurcating, not totally, but largely. Telephone. No. 5G telephone no. And beyond will probably also largely be bifurcated. And there'll be further bifurcation in particular in areas with national security implications. But I don't think it's very improbable. I find it hard to believe that it can be separated into two separate systems. The top principles may be one the US may want to reduce. It wants to increase the supply chain's resilience by reducing its dependence on China. And China may want to become more self-

reliant in certain technologies and rely more on domestic demand to drive growth. But all of this, on both sides, is easier said than done. And even if it can be done, it will take a very long time and the cost will be very high. And I think it is highly improbable. Now, competition within a system is fundamentally different or it is not an existential competition because it's within the same framework. They may want to dominate the framework, but nobody wants to destroy it. But China is certainly a pure competitor. But to call it a systemic rival is, I think, a bit of an exaggeration. China is one of the main beneficiaries of this global system. And. There's no strong reason for anybody in Beijing to want to kick over the table and seek radically different arrangements who may want to dominate the system. But that's a little bit different from wanting to destroy or change the system. All right. So, you know, and that's a very fundamental difference. It is not an existential competition. It is not. You know, it's been a long time since anybody could hope or fear that communism would replace capitalism or vice versa. You know, this is basic. All right. Well, that's good news. It's good news for small countries like Singapore, like most Southeast Asian countries. And like most countries in the Gulf where you are right now. Why? Because competition this kind of competition is far more complex and complex. Days, agency, if only you have the whip to recognize it. And agility and the political will too. To use it. But it's there. You know, it is there is not. The choices are never binary lost in Singapore, and I think most of these Asian countries are the same. We see no reason why we must align all our interests across all domains in one direction, one direction or another. Right. And our region, at least Southeast Asia, is naturally multipolar. It's not just that the U.S. and China are there, but there is Japan, the US ally, whose interests are not the same. There is India, there's South Korea, there's Australia. That is China. Of course, there are European countries. So we have a multipolar environment that increases maneuver space. I think that's something to bear firmly in mind.

**Jonathan Fulton:** I think that's a great point. I mean, there are a lot of great points there. But the agency and the binaries that we're often confronted with when folks talk about this strategic competition, seem to look at everything through the lens of the options of the U.S. or China. And what we've seen here in the UAE recently is you can see being confronted with these two choices, the country just kind of refuses to acknowledge the premise of great power competition. And we saw just a couple of months ago, you know, Prime Minister Modi and the UAE announced this Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement where, you know, I don't think it's gotten a lot of notice, but countries like. So yeah, I'm sure you did. We also had Moon Jae in from then president of South Korea, here in January. Not many people noticed that because it was the same day as the Houthi drone attack. But what you see is a lot of other countries are advancing their agendas in different ways. And I think this is important to consider, especially in the Gulf, because, you know, coming from your perspective in Southeast Asia or with your vast experience across Asia, you know, there are so many countries, small, middle, great powers of Asia that have a deep interest here. And I think what we'll see is a lot of these countries start to advance a more, you know, a level playing field. It's not just about China or the U.S., right?

**Bilahari Kausikan:** Yeah, that is one aspect. However, I think it is very unfamiliar to countries in the Middle East, in particular the Gulf. 50 years or so ago. The US made a terrible mistake in Vietnam. Right. And he rectified this mistake. And part of the process of rectification of that mistake was the announcement of what was then called the Guam Doctrine in 1969. And then the blockchain essentially moves the US from being a direct intervener. On the ground being the offshore balancer. The. And in that role as an offshore balancer where you rely much more on naval power, and air power to maintain your presence in the region, but without getting too involved in, you know, entangled in conflicts as tragically the US did in Vietnam. The U.S. has been remarkably consistent in our region in that Rule 50, the OAS. But now I think a similar movement, a similar change of strategic posture is underway after the mistakes that the U.S. made in Afghanistan and Iraq. And I think it is all good right? But I think this is very unfamiliar. The Gulf countries in the Middle East, all of them are friendly to the U.S., are not used to dealing with the U.S. as offshore balancers. And it's a fundamentally different skill set if you like. Now, the role of the offshore balancer is often being described, especially in the Middle East, as the U.S. is in retreat or withdrawing from the Middle East. I think that's a drastic oversimplification because I don't see any sign of the Fifth Fleet moving out of Bahrain or the US Air Force moving out of Qatar. And we have been from time to time, we have the US demonstrate that it can reach out and kill bad guys wherever they are. But the deal with offshore balancers requires a different skill set. And that is the larger meaning of the Abraham Accords. The U.S. is saying, guys, you know, Iran is a big problem, deal maybe is an existential problem to you, but is not to me. I'm not going away. I'll be there to hold you back. If the Houthis and drones, I will help you shoot them down and so on. But if you think this is existential to you, you better get together and do something about it. But because of the offshore balancer. Also the overall balance, but does not want to get involved unless its interests are directly threatened. And it's very hard to see how U.S. interests are going to be directly threatened again in the Middle East. The main reason the US got involved in the Gulf in the first place is oil. The US doesn't need the Middle East or I mean, its allies need the world economy. But that's not a direct U.S. interest. That's a derivative interest. So the U.S. is not going away. But it's a different order of interests. So it will choose its terms of engagement, and it will expect its friends and allies in the region to do more among themselves and by themselves. Now, that's something I think is rather unfamiliar to countries in the Gulf because that is a fundamental renegotiation of the currency accord. After the Second World War. It means you have to rely more on yourself. It means the region. The Gulf in this case has to get together in the way ASEAN got together. And I said, It's not perfect, but it is. It has stabilized the region to minimize. Opportunities for external powers to interfere in the region. We do welcome all external powers but don't follow their interests. That is something because now the Gulf is used and this includes Israel is used to looking for the strongest guy on the block and aligning itself with it. But what do you do when there are? The strongest guy in the block says I don't want to get involved in every scuffle, you know? And who else is there? There's China. But China is a relatively new player. I'm not very familiar with the Middle East yet. It is trying its level best to keep its engagement primarily economic. And if it is not economic, trying to, you know, keep it to selling arms or, you know, providing these arms and so on. But I don't think the Chinese are keen to get involved in the geopolitics of the Middle East as bad as the US and the Soviet Union were. Now Russia is still there. The limits of the Russian capabilities have been starkly revealed in Ukraine and even before Ukraine. I was always of the

opinion that what Russia has currently done in the Middle East is much more due to American mistakes than to the Russian state because it is not a strong country. The size of its economy is only about the size of South Korea, and it's shrinking. China is a different matter, but China is very reluctant to get involved in geopolitics. So you guys in the Middle East, in the Gulf, in particular, have to rely more on each other. And I think it is not a comfortable posture for you. You have the regional organization, the GCC, but it doesn't work very well, as we all know. Let's face it. Right. I see. Is not perfect, but it certainly works better than the GCC and you are now. Yes. At the beginning of this new phase, you're not familiar with it. But, you know, you will have to get familiar with it because it's not going to change at all. I told my Israeli friends this long ago. Look, China knows that you are your best friend and is always going to be the US, so you will do what he can with you. But in the end, if China has to choose anybody in the Middle East, which is Iraq, that's something that they are familiar with, is a civilization like me. And civilizations and states form to come and go. Civilizations endure right up to now because the U.S. was there to hold the balance. China could have its cake and eat it. It could have good relations. Iran has good relations with Saudi Arabia, and good relations with the UAE, Israel, Egypt, and everybody. But that is not a sustainable position over the long run, I don't think, and the Chinese know it and they're not quite sure what to do about it themselves. It's one of the reasons why they are not to get not too eager to get entangled too much in the geopolitics of the Middle East.

**Jonathan Fulton:** There's a lot in there that I think is. I love to sit here for a couple of hours and talk about this. But we don't have that. But I will just say, you know when you talk about the U.S. as an offshore balancer, that's something I teach a class here and in the Emirates. It's the international relations of the Gulf. And we look at the long arc of U.S. involvement in the region. A lot of my students are 20 and, you know, they were born after September 11th. You know, their entire lives have been under this huge U.S. hegemonic military presence. And they just assume, as anybody would if that's what you've grown up with, that that's how it's always been. You know, so when we look at, you know, that the U.S. had this long period of offshore balancing, driving its regional relations up until about Desert Storm, you know, that this would be kind of a return to the normal right sizing. As you said a lot of its regional interests remain the same, but it doesn't require the same kind of presence. And like you say, you can see countries like India, like Japan, like Korea, like the EU, like the U.K. all these countries have an interest in playing, you know, a larger role because they want the energy, because they want the markets because they want the stability. And China, I think, is the same way. What's interesting looking out from the region here is, that I think you're right. Everybody's been saying for years we want to see Gulf countries playing a bigger role in securing the Gulf. And it's a point I bring up. When you mentioned ASEAN with my students to say I was born in 1975 and at that point, Southeast Asia was not seen as, you know, the place you take your new wife on a honeymoon. Right. Or you go on a luxury shopping trip. You know, if Southeast Asia was able to transition away from the really difficult conditions that they faced in the late sixties and seventies, you know, there's a roadmap. This is a political issue. What's happening in the Gulf isn't fundamentally religious or cultural. It's political. So I think ASEAN is a model.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** Look, ASEAN, the divisions among ASEAN countries are probably far worse.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Yeah.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** In 67, ASEAN was formed then they may have been the Gulf. There is a certain culture I wouldn't call homogeneity in the Gulf. There's a certain religious homogeneity in the Gulf that doesn't exist in Southeast Asia. And these are primordial things. Well, we can do it. There's no reason the Gulf can't do it. Yeah. You have a lot more going for you now. You are much more prosperous than we ever were at that time. And money helps.

**Jonathan Fulton:** And very deeply integrated.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** It's not everything. But you are much better, you know, in much better condition. But it's an unfamiliar thing.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Yeah.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** An unfamiliar thing. And you've got to get familiar with it.

**Jonathan Fulton:** The one thing I'd like to push back on a little is, is your point that China's natural alignment is with Iran over the long term? I do take your point about, you know, China and Iran have often talked about the civilizational connection. I think that they're both revolutionary states is important, that they both feel that they're, you know, trying to earn their place in an order that's been a little hostile to them or very hostile. But I do think China's preference in the region is for stability and Iran doesn't contribute to that very much.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** So torn. You know, probably none of your students or you have had conversations I've had with Chinese scholars and vigils about the Gulf when I was an official.

And I don't think you like the way they find it. Very puzzling. They find the sociological structure of most Gulf states something very unfamiliar and not something that they have a lot of confidence in over the long run. It may change. I'm not saying it's a perception that is stuck in stone. But when they look at Iran, they see something familiar. Stability is their prime objective because they need energy for all kinds of your needs in the markets. They want stability. Right. And they do recognize that Iran is a destabilizing force. They do recognize that. But they are willing to try to have their cake and eat it. And that's my point. I think in the long run is what they have been able to do so far, have good relations with Israel, good relations with U.A.E., with Saudi Arabia, with other Gulf states, you know, with Egypt and with Iran is going to be difficult and the Chinese are going to face some rather odd choices sooner or later. And my point is, we should not if I was in the Gulf, I wouldn't take it for granted that they're going to choose me. But I. But you know, the main thing that they want to do right now, the Chinese are going to increase its military footprint in the Gulf, but it is primarily going to do that in a seaborne manner to protect its energy supplies because right now is energy routes being protected by rule by the Fifth Fleet and separately by its primary rival? This is intolerable for any major power. So you're going to see a bigger Chinese footprint, a naval footprint. Right. And they will seek facilities in the Gulf. And that's all right. You know, to me it is a natural major power behavior, great power behavior. But it's a very different thing from, say, that the Chinese will now protect, for example, Singapore. We have probably the closest defense and security relationship with the United States of all the ASEAN countries. It's even a closer relationship than formal U.S. allies like Thailand. And the Philippines is only slightly below countries like Japan, Australia, and South Korea. But we do not expect the U.S. to defend us. We never have. We only expect two things of the U.S. one, to maintain the overall balance of power in our immediate region and the larger region, because only the US can do that as an offshore balancer and to sell us this stuff so we can deter and defend ourselves, especially the high tech stuff, the fighter aircraft, and some other stuff. But we don't expect them to fight for us. They want to. Why should they? And I think no Asian country expects the U.S... To come to their defense. No. Maybe the Philippines and Thailand at one time. The Philippines may be to some degree still, but we expect them to hold the ballots with no balance. And then we will also defend early Singapore's attitude. I thought, sure, maybe the UAE is slightly different because the UAE has a very capable air force and a military. But. But you have a fundamental dilemma that we do not. I would mention the Gulf state. It's one of the smaller Gulf states. I've had this conversation where we have national service. That means conscription. I was an officer. I served under the age of 50 in the reserve. An operational force is the reserve because a full-time service, which in my case was almost three, was two years. It now is reduced to trading. The Gulf States UAE has introduced conscription by is martial and is a rather short period. And this is a great handicap because you have small indigenous populations. But not everybody is going to make a soldier. That's a fact. Right. Some people, for, you know, physical reasons. Elvis, that's awful. These are going to be female and I don't think it is culturally going to be very acceptable. We have female warriors in the Gulf. Maybe it is by known families and so on. I don't know. So that's a thing that I think the Gulf States that I know of have only begun to grapple with. It's not. Technology is. There's one solution: a high Air Force and Navy and even. But you need some ground force to defend yourself. And that's where and you can't do it by mercenaries. Mercenaries are intrinsically not

reliable. So I don't know what the solution to that is, but it's something I think my friends in the Gulf I've said to think about.

**Jonathan Fulton:** No, I think you're right. The fundamental asymmetry of the Gulf. I mean, when you've got Iran with 84 million battle-hardened, capable, professional military and in the UAE, a country of 1 million citizens, you know, as you say, it's very difficult to take, you know, a nascent program. It's only been a few years since this national service has been in effect. And my take on it is that it's less a matter of national security than it is a matter of building a national identity.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** You know, I think that's true. That is true for us, too. Yeah, but that's important.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Absolutely.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** But you still need the ball somehow.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Right. But I do think that you know, when it comes down to it, you saw throughout the eighties Gulf countries spending, you know, literal fortunes on hardware. And then when Saddam's army marched into Kuwait, there was nothing they could do to stop it. And I think everybody thought that was worse than that. I mean, that directly resulted in the U.S. footprint. I think the realization that extra-regional powers are a very important pillar of their security. And I do believe you're right, China has a non-alliance policy. They're not going to play that kind of role. I don't see China wanting to engage that way. But I also don't see China having to choose. I mean, the U.S. is used as the balance of power approach where you're kind of stuck on one side or the other. China's got these partnership agreements where they say, let's focus on things that matter to both of us. We'll build up areas of common interest. Let's not talk about the stuff that gets us into trouble and just kind of slowly build trust. And I think China maybe believes it can maintain this kind of economy first presented to the region without getting caught up in politics for a while.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** Well, I think if I was Chinese, I would certainly hope so.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Yeah, of course.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** But, you know, you know better than I, the Middle East, as a way of sucking in people into this geopolitics. Despite their intentions, the US was probably a little bit different because after 911 they jumped in maybe too hastily. Probably hastily, definitely. But okay, time will tell. Time will tell. But I, I think the fundamental security dilemma of the Middle East is, as I describe it, I mean, the Gulf in particular. That's why the Abraham Accords are so important, I think because the country can't do it either. And I don't think Israel is a better place than most of the others. And, you know, it needs help, too. It will need political help. It will need, you know, military help. But, you know, we'll see. I mean, I am very pessimistic about Iraq with or without a new JCPOA. They are determined to be a nuclear power. And if you're a civilization, what's 15 years? Ten years can wait, you know? Right. And if I was, Iran is perfectly logical. If I was sitting in Tehran and I saw what happened in the last five, six, or seven years, I see a tiny, insignificant country at the other end of the world that will not reach most of my people. I've never heard of sitting down and talking to the President of the United States on more or less equal terms. Right. And that country is North Korea which is a poor country. Is a country that is a record low country. But they are sitting down there. And why are they sitting down there when there is only one reason they have nuclear weapons? Right now, if I were sitting here, there are I would say, look, I'm the great pusher, you know? And so obviously, I would one day be. I can wait. I can wait. Right. But, you know, I'm going to be there. It was the ambition of the Shah state. So a Persian ambition is not a mullah's ambition.

**Jonathan Fulton:** This to me was one of the great mysteries of, you know, the US pulling out of the JCPOA while simultaneously trying to come to some kind of an agreement with North Korea and starting a trade war with China.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** You know, we'll look for a logical explanation. There's no.

**Jonathan Fulton:** There's nothing. Right. But I kept thinking, like, you know, there's one country that can help you engage with Iran and North Korea. I don't want to overstate China's influence either. But if there's any great power that has some kind of, you know, positive engagement, it's China. So you're trying to work with the North Koreans, you're doing something with Iran. Meanwhile, you start a trade war with China. It was a little confusing to us.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** North Korea is very low. Yeah, if you distrust each other profoundly.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Deeply.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** Deeply. And in fact, sometimes I think about when I used to travel. North Korea. They probably discuss China much more than they distrust the U.S. because the U.S. is further away. Yeah. Okay.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Yeah. I lived in South Korea for five years.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** The idea is actually to create more options for themselves. But, you know, that's another matter.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Yeah. Yeah. I lived in South Korea for five years in early 2000. So there are 2000, 2005. And so at the kind of collapse of the Sunshine policy and then the normal young administration coming in and, you know, it was always interesting to see how China was described as a potentially major, you know, having tremendous leverage in Pyongyang because that just was contrary to everything I kept hearing.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** Well, anyway, that's another matter.

**Jonathan Fulton:** But, yeah, now that we're getting the map, it's getting too big here.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** Yeah.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Okay. Well, one thing I think is interesting because, again, I've we're recording this. It's June the seventh. I have an article coming out later today looking at again why the binary of great power competition, I think doesn't see the whole picture, especially here in the Emirates, where you keep hearing, you know, the U.S. is the security partner in China's, the economic partner. And if you just look at the numbers, China's number one trade partner. But the gap between China and India is pretty small while the gap between India and Japan is

pretty small as well. You can see a lot of other countries that have, you know, difficult relationships with Beijing that are also pretty significant economic actors here, pretty significant technological actors. India, where you've got a huge expatriate population, something like 40-plus percent of the U.S. population is from India. Um, tremendous cultural power, soft power. It seems to me that one of the shortcomings of this strategic competition narrative is that you kind of miss out on the influence or the leverage that all of these other countries have in these countries. Rather than just being a case of the U.S. versus China.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** You need to. Okay. One of the things that ASEAN tries to do. There are two great platforms, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the others, which embed external powers in South East Asia and therefore enhance the natural multipolarity of the region. And even if these are bilateral relationships, it does embed them in the region and therefore creates a larger area of space. Imagine there's only one major power in your region. You have no member of space zero. The only two you have are slightly more but two. There's always a question of collaboration. So it is better to have as many as possible engage positively and give them some stake in that. And then it's up to your ingenuity and will to take advantage of the opportunities that are the oldest. As I said, there's always agency.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Well, that kind of leads to another point. I was thinking I mentioned a few minutes ago that India and the UAE signed this economic agreement. South Korea's working on a free trade agreement. Trade, I think, and development are really what drive a lot of relationships in this region. And I think the same can be said in Southeast Asia. And this is something that I think China is beating the U.S. on, especially here. You can see that the U.S. politically has a hard time signing these big multilateral trade agreements the way that, you know, it did before, say, 2017. I don't know. What's your perspective on this? Is this something that can promote more stability here?

**Bilahari Kausikan:** Well, I think there are two aspects of this, but I don't know the figures for the Gulf or the Middle East. But if you look at South East Asia. The stock of U.S. investment is larger than China, Japan, and South Korea combined. Very few people know that, but it is true. So bilaterally the US is a key. Economic partner to almost every Southeast Asian country, for example, Singapore. China is our largest partner in trade in goods, but the US passive passes that and trades in services and the stock of US investment and its high-quality investment is an investment at the high end of the value chain. And that's important I think, because the long term security, if I, if I was looking and I think the governments have come to this conclusion, the long term security of me in the Gulf is not I need the hot power, I need, I need the friends and so on. Right. The traditional security issue. And my long-term security. Rests on what is. Mohammad bin Salman is driving in Saudi Arabia. Mohammad bin Zayed is doing it in UAE and all the Gulf countries are doing it. Economic change requires social change and a more

diversified economy, a more sustainable economy, not just in the green sense. But, you know, because, you know, if you know what I mean, a more diversified economy. And that requires, of course, other kinds of changes, like social, and cultural changes. And I think that is the long term. Now, if I was in the Gulf, I'd be looking at each economic partner, not just from the traditional security point of view, but where they can contribute to that much more fundamental foundation of security. China certainly has a role, but Japan has a role. South Korea has a role. India has a role. And they are playing this role. But now how do I honor this role? How do I leverage these roles in my interests? I think China has a role. And is it only going to? What kind of technology do I need? What kind of managerial expertise is going on? Many of these things I have to do myself. But where can I learn these lessons now? Uh, Singapore. Came to understand. I came to engage, to go much more seriously, only in early 2000. For most of my career, people don't know me first. My first job was in a foreign ministry. Much longer for me to want to confess was as this officer for the Middle East. And I held that August position for 40 minutes. And then our then permanent secretary said, Oh, give the boy a proper job. Because we were where we were, our engagement was minimal. It was mainly in the UN, the non aligned movement, and so on. It wasn't even energy because we are all refining at the center, right? But then we recognized. Quite late that while we had been ignoring the Gulf States, they were not ignoring us. But. And in both. In a positive way. In a negative way. Right. So we decided that we have to learn more about this region and we did begin to engage it much more. When I joined the Foreign Ministry, we had. Two embassies in the Middle East. Two and a half hours. One we had we had an embassy in Cairo because we were unexpectedly independent. Cairo was a big vote in the non aligned movement, and we needed recognition. And we had a consulate in Jeddah because 50% of our population is Muslim and they need to go and watch. Now, we are, you know, just in the Gulf, we have an embassy in Riyadh with the embassy in Abu Dhabi. We have a consul general in Dubai. We have a consul general in Muscat soon to be upgraded. And we have an embassy in Turkey. If you want to break the logjam in our region, we have nonresident ambassadors to almost every country except Yemen and Iraq. All right. So that's just from the diplomatic point of view, we are much more engaged because we found that, you know, there are things we can do together. I don't think the Singapore experience is entirely transferable wholesale to, say, Abu Dhabi or Dubai. But there are things that. Need not be reinvented, shall we say, can be adapted.

**Jonathan Fulton:** And I think they look very closely at the example of Singapore. You know, if you look at a place with a very diverse populace and, you know, not a lot of resources. How do you manage that? You know, and just here, like, I know talking to different people from Singapore, that one of the questions Emirati officials often have is, you know, you know, in terms of automation or digitization, how do you handle, you know, because there are big challenges in staffing and relying on expatriate workers here. So if they can learn anything from how Singapore has been able to navigate some of these pressures, I think they're watching very keenly.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** We were a bit lucky because where we started, our population, the indigenous population where we became unexpectedly independent was about 2 million. Right. And they're going to have a tougher time because we're going to be much more reliant on expatriates. You know, labor in the broader sense. But I think there are things that we can share, we can do together. And is it a natural partnership, I mean, between South East Asia and the Gulf. But is it an unexploited partnership or not fully exploited?

**Jonathan Fulton:** Under underexplored.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** Sites?

**Jonathan Fulton:** Absolutely. Well, the last question that I mean, you've already kind of given us a lot here to think about. But just coming back to this, there are tensions in the US-China relationship. Singapore, as I said at the opening, I think has been a model on how to navigate this. What advice do you have for Gulf countries that are pretty new to this?

**Bilahari Kausikan:** Well, first of all, don't panic. Don't panic. Right. And, you know, don't think your choices are binary. All right. And remember, you always have agency. And once you understand these three points, then you don't see any particular reason why you have to neatly align all your ducks one in in the same direction. Sometimes it will and always you have to have a very clear sense of what your national interests are. Because sometimes the posture you take may appear to align you with one or the other or some third country. But it must always be in our national interests. When we say in South East Asia and Singapore, we do not wish to choose sides. What we mean is we don't want our posture to be decided for us. We'll decide for ourselves. It may take us in the American direction, may take us in the Chinese direction or the Japanese or the Indian or the direction of Botswana for all it matters. Right? But it is always our national interest. That is the advice. I do not think the Gulf States need advice. Not certainly not Abu Dhabi, not the UAE. I think they know this very well, but I think they've.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Got a lot of experience with external powers over the years, for sure.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** But, you know, the thing we are urging is China. My last point, right? I think there's a lot of interest in China, the Gulf, or the Middle East generally, but the interest is not necessarily matched by knowledge. Well, understanding, and that's a great vulnerability. That's

even true of Israel as we went to Israel, which is somewhat better off, but only slightly better off. Only slightly. So I think that's a huge information gap that, you know, that needs to be plugged. And, you know, my institute put out a small plan for ourselves. If you want to work with us on understanding, China will help. We're happy to.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Agree. That's one of the themes in this podcast with different folks we've had on is we can see a big gap, you know, that there is an acute need. There are not a lot of area studies, there's not a lot of language study happening yet. We're starting to see that change in the Emirates where they've introduced Chinese into the K-12 program. But that's you know, that's a long term.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** That's a very long thing. Right. You need to have it. I don't know that there's any kind of East Asian institute anywhere in the Gulf.

**Jonathan Fulton:** I don't know of one. I mean, the King Faisal Center of Islamic Research has.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** Yeah, but you don't have an institute that is devoted to East Asia, because don't forget, East Asia is not just China, but Japan is Korea, you know? And, you know, this is something that at the level of a tie to people, to people or scholarly exchanges, I think there's a lot of opportunities there for mutually beneficial collaboration.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Absolutely. Well, I think the Middle East Institute will be a perfect partner to help with a lot of this. Bill, thanks so much for this has been really helpful. I always enjoy hearing some of your experiences and your takes on what's happening in the region. Appreciate it.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** Well, thank you for inviting me, Jonathan. It's been fun. And, you know, keep in touch and you'll come and visit us. I'll visit you sooner or later.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Oh.

**Bilahari Kausikan:** I intend to. Right now, the only thing that is keeping me away from the Gulf is the climate and medical school.

**Jonathan Fulton:** Thanks so much. So to our audience, thanks for joining us. You can follow us on social media, subscribe and read us on iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. Bill, Ari, thanks so much.

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