Jon Alterman: Bilahari Kausikan is chairman of the Middle East Institute, the National University of Singapore. He had a 37-year career in Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, serving most recently as ambassador at large after a long period of time as the ministry's permanent secretary, a place where I first met him about 15 years ago. Bilahari, thank you very much for joining us on Babel.

Bilahari Kausikan: It's a pleasure, Jon.

Jon Alterman: When did Singapore start paying attention to the Middle East, and when did the Middle East start paying attention to Singapore?

Bilahari Kausikan: That's a very good question. It's a little-known fact of my career that my very first job in the foreign ministry was desk officer for the Middle East, and I held that august position for perhaps 40 minutes, when our then permanent secretary—who subsequently became ambassador to Washington and later president, S.R. Nathan, found out, and said, "Give the boy a proper job." For a long time, until relatively recently, our engagement with the Middle East was very minimal. We had two missions in the entire region. We had a consulate in Jeddah because 14 percent of our population is Muslim and the consulate took care of pilgrims that went on Hajj to Mecca, and we had an embassy in Cairo because when we became unexpectedly independent, getting diplomatic recognition was an important factor and Cairo, a big part of the non-alignment movement, recognized Singapore. We also had unofficial relations with Israel because when we had independence thrust upon us in 1965, creating armed forces was one of the most urgent tasks because our security environment was not stable. Everybody that we asked for help turned us down for a simple reason: they didn't think we would survive. Israel, however, agreed to help, so we had close, unofficial relations with Israel for a long time. It's only recently that we formally opened an embassy in Tel Aviv. That was the situation for decades, but at the end of the 1990s, we noticed a new phenomenon in Southeast Asia affecting how Islam was conceived and practiced. Traditional Islam in Southeast Asia was highly influenced by Sufiism. It was open and syncretic, and it incorporated many elements of older religions in Southeast Asia, like Buddhism, Hinduism, and even pre-Buddhist and Hindu shamanistic practices. Islam was open, and that was very important because Southeast Asian societies are plural societies—multi-ethnic and multi-faith. In the 1990s, we noticed that this traditional understanding of Islam was being displaced pretty rapidly—and had been being displaced for several years before we noticed—by narrower, stricter interpretations of Islam that were current in the Middle East, Wahhabism in particular. That was disturbing to us because that could undermine social cohesion, not just in Singapore, but it could fundamentally change the politics of Malaysia or Indonesia, where Muslims are a majority. So, we thought we had better take a closer look at the origins of those
interpretations, and we began to engage the Middle East more seriously. That was the context that I was in when I was still in the foreign ministry—when we met, Jon. Singapore’s then-prime minister, Goh Chok Tong, asked us to start a Middle East institute because he correctly understood that the Middle East is such a complicated region that the government will never have enough resources to analyze it adequately.

Jon Alterman: But there is also a time in the 1990s when people from Dubai became quite seized with the Singapore model.

Bilahari Kausikan: When we began to engage the Middle East, we discovered that despite our best efforts to try to ignore the Middle East, the Middle East wasn’t ignoring us—particularly the Gulf states. That included not just Dubai, but the UAE in general, along with Oman, Bahrain, and even Saudi Arabia to some degree. They had been looking at Singapore to see what lessons they could take from us for their own economic development.

Jon Alterman: As you say, Singapore has a pluralistic history. It has a vibrant economy. It operates among Great Powers and navigates between them. It’s part of a kind of regional integration in Southeast Asia that’s certainly absent from the Middle East. What do you think are the most important things that Middle Eastern states should take from the Singapore experience, looking beyond the Singapore’s economic model as an Entrepot?

Bilahari Kausikan: The key lesson from Singapore is that no matter how small you are or how perilous your circumstances may be, you always have agency. Whether you can recognize the opportunity to exercise your agency, or whether you exercise it wisely, or have the courage and infrastructure (physical and human infrastructure) to seize opportunities and take advantage of your agency, is a different question. But it’s a very important lesson, especially for the Gulf. Israel has always known that small states have agency. That’s why Israel exists. But I think the Gulf is only beginning to understand this. For the longest time, the basic strategic approach of the Gulf was to look for the strongest power around and embrace it—whether that power is France, the United Kingdom, or the United States. But we’re entering a period—in the Gulf particularly, but also globally—where no power is going to be strong enough for that to work. I think the United States will always be in the region. China will be there. Other powers will be in the Gulf, too, but you have to take more responsibility for your own fate. One of the things that the Gulf lacks is some kind of regional organization. Singapore’s diplomacy spends a lot of time and energy on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN is not perfect—far from it—but in its essential function to manage relations between its members, it does pretty well. In that essential function, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) doesn’t do particularly well, as you know. I think it ought to do better because there will always be differences of
interest among countries in a region—even countries that have many elements of common culture and religion like in the Gulf—but that's precisely why you need some kind of means for managing those differences of interest and leveraging your commonalities. That's one big point that you must use to exercise your agency. The other point is that you have to have good relations with all the major powers. They need to continue to have good relations with the United States. They need to build relations with China—with Japan, South Korea, with ASEAN, and with the European Union. Because ultimately, I don't think we are ever again going to see a position where the United States is prepared to be the primary security provider and bear any burden or pay any price to uphold order in the Middle East. The United States doesn't face any more existential challenges after the collapse of the Soviet Union, so why should you bear any burden or pay any price? You have other priorities. You're not in retreat from the Middle East. The U.S. Air Force is still in the UAE and Qatar. The Fifth Fleet is still in Bahrain, and I don't see them leaving. What is happening is a re-negotiation of the unilateral terms in which you engage the Middle East, and here there are lessons. More than 50 years ago, the United States made a dreadful mistake in Vietnam—a costly mistake—but it has rectified that mistake over the last 50 years, moving from a posture of direct intervention to one of being the offshore balance. It has been remarkably consistent in East Asia in that role. The United States made dreadful mistakes in the Middle East 20 years ago, and an analogous shift from direct intervention to the role of an offshore balancer is happening in the region right now. As I've told my Israeli, Arab, and Gulf friends, that is the larger meaning of the Abraham Accords.

Jon Alterman: So let me ask a question about the transition and the growing pains of the transition between countries having very close relations with the United States, countries relying on the United States, and countries having greater autonomy and agency—as we've seen in U.S.-Saudi ties. There is a lot of tension that arises when countries say, "We're not at the beck and call of the United States, but we want all the things we've gotten from the United States." The United States says, "We're not going to do the same things." It seems to me that the transition from where we've been to where you say we're going is a transition that's fraught with crises.

Bilahari Kausikan: It will certainly be fraught with frictions. There will be a lot of work to getting accustomed to this new kind of relationship on both sides—particularly on the Gulf side. I think the UAE has made that kind of adjustment a bit more smoothly than Saudi Arabia, but I think they will have to make it because there are still things that you have to work with the United States on—and things that you can only work with the United States on. There is a lot of simplistic talk about China replacing the United States. China is moving into the Middle East aggressively, but I'll make two points about that. First, what's wrong with China moving into the Middle East? It only seems strange because China wasn't in the Middle East before, but China
is becoming a global power. It is much more dependent on Middle Eastern energy than the United States, so it's natural that China wants to build relations with countries in the region. The previous situation where China was absent is the abnormal situation. China is in a rather sweet spot now, in the sense that it can develop relations with Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE simultaneously.

Jon Alterman: And Iran.

Bilahari Kausikan: And Iran. That's important, but is this sustainable over the long run? I don't think that it is. I'm rather pessimistic about one point. I do not think it is possible to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons capability. They are set on it, and eventually they'll get there. You can delay it. Iran may delay it in their own interest, but eventually they will get there. Now, if this is regarded as an existential issue to Israel, Saudi Arabia, and to some other countries, then the only way to stop it is a war. It might not be imminent. I'm not saying it's going to happen next week, next year, or even the next five or ten years, but to my mind, that is the trajectory unless Iran essentially changes its own designs and plans. In the run up to that, there is going to be fraught relationships—not merely between the United States and Israel and Gulf states, but fraught relationships between China and Israel and the Gulf states. China will not be able to sustain simultaneously improving its relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran forever. It will become more and more difficult. So, what's the conclusion if I was sitting in the Gulf rather than Singapore? The conclusion is that I have got to take better care of myself. And since Iran is so much bigger than me, I will have to work with other countries in my own region that share similar concerns about Iran. That is the larger meaning of the Abraham Accords. It's not just about diplomatic relationship with Israel or developing economic ties to Israel. The fundamental strategic basis is to work together to counter Iran. Problems between the United States and Saudi Arabia are transition problems. They will be resolved one way or the other—never perfectly or to the entire satisfaction of either side. There were transition problems in East Asia and Southeast Asia 50 years ago, but it was 50 years ago, so we've all forgotten about it. We've gotten used to it.

Jon Alterman: During the Trump Administration, you had a U.S. government that felt very warmly toward the Gulf monarchies. There's a perception that the Biden Administration has a lot of skepticism toward most of the Gulf monarchies. As you think about your career in diplomacy, is that kind of shift in U.S. policy with different presidents something is not a big deal in hindsight, or is it a problem for the United States when we have moved away from the policy of politics stops at the water's edge, and priorities can change radically from one president to another?
Bilahari Kausikan: The idea that politics should stop at the water's edge is a great idea, but it has been honored more often in the breach—by every country, not just the United States—than in observance. The United States is what it is. You have a system in which every four years there are elections, and even if the same party and the same president stays in power, there are significant changes. I have spent almost all of my career going back and forth to Washington and telling you all the same things, because there were different people in power. It's a nuisance, but you are what you are. There's only one United States, and we're stuck with you, and you're stuck with us. We've got to work together. I've often been asked in my career, "is the United States reliable?" The most recent time I was asked was after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. But my reply throughout my career has always been the same. Of course, the United States is not reliable—because of the very reason you just said, that every few months I have to go to Washington and tell different people the same things. How is that reliable? It's not reliable, but you are indispensable. The question of whether you are reliable is a moot point. I don't think there is anybody in East Asia—certainly not in Singapore—that thought President Trump's unpredictability was great. But we all had a part in the transition over the last 50 years to build strong institutional ties with the United States, and those institutional ties were stressed by the Trump administration, but they held together. You have had presidents with very strong views before, but you have had institutions that are strong too, and they have provided the continuity through the ups and downs and vacillations of American politics.

Jon Alterman: Let me go back to China because Singapore has been not only a keen observer of China, but active navigating changing U.S.-China ties over many decades. What lessons should Middle Eastern states learn from Singapore's experience navigating between the United States and China as China is coming into the Middle East in unprecedented ways.

Bilahari Kausikan: "Unprecedented" is the key word. There's no reason China should not be in the Middle East, and there's no reason that Middle Eastern countries should not cultivate relations to China. In fact, they'd be foolish not to. As I've said, the main lesson from Singapore is that you have agency and that way that you exercise that agency is not binary. The world has become more complex, and in complexity, there are more opportunities to exercise agency in your own interests. What does that require? It requires a very strong sense of your own interests, and it requires the capability to assess your environment in a very cold-blooded way so that you know how to position yourself. But it's not binary. In fact, I think having close relations with the United States is a necessary condition for having close relations with China and vice versa. In other words, the prerequisite of dealing effectively with either is to deal simultaneously with both.

Jon Alterman: That's a really interesting idea.
Bilahari Kausikan:

We have to get away from the binary mindset that was instilled in all of us during the 40 years or so of the Cold War. Yes, strategic competition between the United States and China is real, and it is a permanent feature of international relations. But that is the case in international relations. It was only a very short period historically—between 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down and 2008 or 2009, when the global financial crisis broke out—where it seemed that there was now a unipolar world. The polar world is not just bipolar, but it’s naturally multipolar. Multipolarity is not necessarily symmetrical. Not every pole is going to be of equal weight, but the different poles exist. I really dislike this stroke—which I have heard too often, including in the Middle East—that U.S.-China relations are a new Cold War. That’s a very intellectually lazy way of looking at this very complicated competition. The United States and the Soviet Union had two separate systems connected only tangentially at the margins. The purpose of their competition was to see which system would displace the other globally, as well as in specific countries. That type of competition was binary, no doubt. But today, the United States and China are both vital, irreplaceable parts of one single global system. They are connected to each other and to the rest of us, including Middle Eastern countries, by a web of supply chains of a density, complexity, and scope that are unprecedented in history. The United States and China are competing within a system, and they probably will compete within that system for the foreseeable future. Neither is very comfortable with it, and both are trying to mitigate their interdependence because interdependence is another way of saying mutual vulnerability. The United States is trying a strategy to diversify its supply chains, at least in important sectors, while the Chinese have been trying to become more self-reliant, but both strategies are easier said than done. Even if they can be done, it will take a long time to have any significant impact. In the meantime, you have to compete within the system, and the dynamics of competition within a system are fundamentally different from the dynamics of competition between systems. So, this is not a binary competition. It’s complicated and it’s confusing, but in that complexity, there is an opportunity to exercise agency. That is something the Gulf states have not completely internalized yet.

Jon Alterman:

One of the other aspects of complexity you’ve said is the Abraham Accords bringing the region together.

Bilahari Kausikan:

That is the intention of the Abraham Accords.

Jon Alterman:

Yes, but the region is remarkably unintegrated. My question is, with the perception of a consistent threat from Iran, do you need a country like the United States to be there as a referee, as an integrator, as a lubricant to help that process along, or does the logic of regional integration suffice to draw
the UAE, Israel, and then other countries alongside?

Bilahari Kausikan: Regional integration requires stability, and there is no regional stability in any region without the United States as part of the equation. The United States doesn’t have to be the main factor of the equation, but it has to be part of the equation. And the U.S. part of the equation in the Middle East is not going to be direct intervention, except occasionally, when they see a bad guy somewhere and reach out and kill him. But that’s very minor and low-level in the bigger scheme of things. You still need this balance to allow regional integration to take root and grow, but the other factor is that countries in the region need to understand that they need to integrate.

Jon Alterman: Do you think they do?

Bilahari Kausikan: Not yet—not sufficiently. Everybody wants to have their own tent, and they want to have the most sculptured tent possible. It’s a natural inclination, but that doesn’t mean you can’t work together. And you must work together. You need the United States around, and I don’t think the United States is going anywhere. But the United States also needs to go through a period of adjustment because there’s 20 years of trauma in the Middle East with failed wars, and the United States needs to get over it. Remember something called the “Vietnam Syndrome”? But eventually, the United States got over it and now you intervene differently in East Asia—not in the same mistaken way, but you lubricate the wheels, as you put it. And you will eventually do so in the Gulf and the Middle East again, but it will take some time for the Middle East to get used to this new way of U.S. engagement and it will take the United States some time to get over the trauma of mishandled engagement over the last 20 years.

Jon Alterman: Bilahari Kausikan, thank you very much for joining us on Babel.

Bilahari Kausikan: Good to see you again, Jon.