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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. In April of this year, I had the pleasure of interviewing Senior Fellow Jonathan Stromseth about the Southeast Asia region, economic and security tensions there, relations among those countries, and their relations with other powers such as India, China, and the United States. On today's program, Jonathan, who holds the Lee Kuan Yew Chair in Southeast Asian Studies here at Brookings, joins me again to share his conversation with a longtime diplomat and one of the leading foreign policy experts from the region. Just a reminder that you can follow the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter @policypodcasts to get the information about and links to all of our shows. And an announcement, you can now listen to Brookings podcasts on Spotify. If you have a question for me or for one of the scholars who appear on the show, send your emails to [BCP@Brookings.edu](mailto:BCP@Brookings.edu). And now, on with the first part of today's show. Jonathan, welcome back to the Brookings Cafeteria.

STROMSETH: Thank you very much Fred, I'm really happy to be here.

DEWS: So when we spoke last time in April, you shared your expertise and insight on various aspects in a very important part of the world, and now you are going to bring us the unique and important perspective from the region. So can you tell me about the person you interviewed and who we're about to hear?

STROMSETH: Yes, I had the chance to speak to Bilahari Kausikan, the former Permanent Secretary and Ambassador at Large at Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He is currently the Chairman of the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore.

DEWS: So he was part of the Foreign Ministry, but he wasn't the Foreign Minister, right?

STROMSETH: No, as Permanent Secretary, Bilahari was the citizen most senior civil servant in the Foreign Ministry, whereas the Foreign Minister, by comparison, is an

elected Member of Parliament.

DEWS: Okay and how did you come about deciding to interview him?

STROMSETH: Well Bilahari is a well-known and respected commentator of international trends in Southeast Asia and the broader region, including the role of major powers like the United States, China, Japan, and India. He always speaks his mind on critical issues affecting the region and he certainly doesn't hesitate to provide straightforward advice or recommendations to Washington or Beijing.

DEWS: Now when we talked in April about Southeast Asia, it was intended to bring this very important region to the attention to the listeners of the show and into a wider audience. Bilahari in the interview says that Americans know little about this very important region, so listeners are going to hear a lot of important things about why this region is important. Here at Brookings, you worked doing research in Southeast Asia. Can you tell us more about the kinds of projects that you're working on here?

STROMSETH: Yeah, I'm focusing on Chinese foreign policy towards Southeast Asia including China's underlying strategic aims and its practical policy initiatives in the region. I'm also examining the possibilities for expanded or deepening U.S. partnerships with emerging partners in Southeast Asia like Vietnam and Indonesia in particular.

DEWS: Alright, is there anything else you want our listeners to know about your discussion with Bilahari?

STROMSETH: Well I thought I'd take this opportunity to say that this podcast will be promoted on a new online forum at Brookings called Southeast Asia Insights, where our goal is to bring Southeast Asian voices to an American audience, especially on critical U.S. foreign policy issues affecting the region or involving the region. We are still in the soft opening phase so to speak, but we hope that it will be the first of many discussions.

DEWS: That's terrific, well without further ado, thanks Jonathan, for stopping by and here is your interview with Bilahari Kausikan. I will just point out that you were here at night

in Washington, D.C. and he was in Singapore twelve hours later on the phone. So without further ado, here is Jonathan Stromseth with Bilahari Kausikan.

STROMSETH: Well I want to welcome you, Bilahari, to this podcast from The Brookings Institution. You have had a long and diverse career in foreign affairs, you are currently the Chairman of the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore, but you have been your country's Ambassador to the United Nations, the Permanent Secretary. Can you tell us just a little bit about how you started your career and how it evolved, and what you're looking to do?

KAUSIKAN: It's all accident. It's all a complete accident. I started off trying to pursue an academic career. The United States government, to which I'm still grateful, whether you're grateful, whether you regret it or not, gave me a Fulbright scholarship to pursue a Ph.D. in the United States in Columbia University. And I went there, I started writing my dissertation and then I had a question for me. I asked myself, do I really want to do this for the rest of my life? And the answer was, no. If you don't want to pursue an academic career why do you need a Ph.D.? So I decided to go back. Although the scholarship was given by the U.S. government, I was bonded to serve the Singapore government. And when they asked me where you want to serve, the only place I had some idea about was because my father was a diplomat to the foreign ministry, so I actually said Foreign Ministry. And, intending to leave, once the period of my bond to the government was over, but I forgot to leave. And then you know the rest is history.

STROMSETH: And the rest is history. Well that's great. It's very interesting if I can say that I actually had a Fulbright to Singapore in the 1980s at the National University of Singapore and then later went to Columbia for my Ph.D., so I guess we have a little bit of a connection.

KAUSIKAN: We reversed it.

STROMSETH: Yeah, we just reversed it.

KAUSIKAN: And then you know the National University of Singapore, which became the National University.

STROMSETH: It seems to me that Southeast Asia is typically described as a large, diverse, economically dynamic region comprised of 11 countries, almost all of which are members of the Association of Southeast Asian nations, or ASEAN. But these countries aren't as well-known I think to most Americans than say China or Japan. What should Americans know and understand about Southeast Asia, and how has this changed, say over the past 30 or 40 years in terms of the role of the region and where is it heading?

KAUSIKAN: Well I find it a little bit surprising, and I'm constantly surprised about how little most Americans know about Southeast Asia. And yet, you fought a very long and costly war in this region, which while the immediate aims of the war was not, were not met, in fact it was a failed war, you did buy time for the rest of the region to put our own house in order. And in that sense, laid the foundation of a fairly prosperous and certainly peaceful, fairly peaceful region that you see today.

Southeast Asia is not a natural region, by which I mean something that can be defined with relations to itself; boiled up where Europe can be defined with relation to itself. Southeast Asia, the only common feature is that there is nothing intrinsic itself, it's in fact a geopolitical term that came into wide use only in the Second World War. It lies at the crossroads between the Pacific and Indian oceans. It's along very important trade routes, very important energy supply routes, and of course militarily strategic significant routes.

So it has always been at the center of major power contestation. In the sixties, in the late sixties before ASEAN was formed, and even up to the early 70s, it was known as the Balkans of Asia. Because the peaceful region you see today was not something to be taken for granted. In fact, it would have been ... if you had predicted the 1967 ASEAN was formed would be in quite good condition we are today, you would have probably been

dismissed as a dreamer or a visionary or hallucinating. But here we are, and we intend to stay.

STROMSETH: And tell us a little about Singapore in particular, a city-state that seems to punch above its weight in Southeast Asia, and more generally, what are the foreign policy goals and priorities of Singapore particularly this year when it's serving as the ASEAN chair?

KAUSIKAN: Singapore, as you said as it is a city-state, it is a most improbable sovereign nation. Our founding fathers did not themselves believe that a city-state could survive by itself. And so we sought independence only within Malaysia in 1963, but for a variety reasons that could not last, we became independent in 1965. Singapore, at least, I mean the archaeological evidence suggests at least since the 14th century, there has been a major trading hub for the region. And that is still our essential role, of course we have broadened the definition of that role. We are now a major financial center, we are a major oil refining set although we have no oil whatsoever, we are a major logistics center, we are a major port.

But you have to understand that modern Singapore is a totally artificial place. We should not exist. It was created by human endeavor and has to be maintained by human endeavor. This is another way of saying that a small city-state has no intrinsic relevance in the international system. Relevance is an artifact to be created, and how we create it needs to be reinvented from time to time. We are currently ASEAN chair until the end of this year, in 2018. Our goal is basically to keep ASEAN on track. We have some specified goals defined by to enhance the resilience of the organization and also to start, initiate in the broad field of digital economy. A year is not overly long time. So what we can do is start things and somebody else will have to take them forward the next year. And of course we will still continue to play a role. So our goals are modest.

STROMSETH: Let's turn to sort of broader trends in the region. You had said

Singapore has also witnessed the involvement of great powers, and so on, and it seems recently, there's so much media and scholarly attention focusing on China's rise and growing influence in the region. With so much focus on its land reclamation activities in the South China Sea, where its economic statecraft illustrated in the Belt and Road Initiative or BRI. And in a recent speech, I noticed from the summer, you discuss global trends that will shape Singapore's future, and one was the rise of China. But you cautioned that this term can sometimes be bandied about sort of loosely, almost like a trope, and you advised that we strive to understand China's rise in its full complexity. What did you mean by that, particularly in the Southeast Asian context?

KAUSIKAN: As a major power, a major economy, contiguous to Southeast Asia, China will always have significant influence in this region. Significant influence, however, does not necessarily mean exclusive influence or even dominant influence, precisely because we are a strategic crossroads, as I earlier mentioned. Southeast Asia will be always the scene of major power competition. That means other powers are bound to be present. The United States is here, and I think you are here to stay. Japan is here, Australia, a medium power, is here, India is another major Asian power contiguous to the region.

It is therefore, strategically, a complex region, but in that complexity, gives the small states of Southeast Asia, and remember the largest of us, even Indonesia or Vietnam are still small by comparison to China or India or the United States or Japan. Because there will always be major [powers] present, that gives us the possibility of maneuver. Maneuver to advance our own regional and national interests. One other point I think which is often overlooked, which is China's rise as a geopolitical threat. But I think historically, if you look at the history of Southeast Asia, there's never been a period, except for a very short and exceptional period of Japanese occupation during the Second World War, where any major power have been able to grasp the region as a whole. It is just too complicated to

shape shifting a region for any major power to claim exclusive dominance.

STROMSETH: I want to move to this question of sort of U.S.-China rivalry in a moment, but I had one of your question on China in particular. I noticed that recently you've been raising concerns about China's policies on one issue in particular, its relations with some people say the overseas Chinese or ethnic Chinese populations in the region. What is at the root of your concern on this issue, and why is this potentially such a significant issue for Southeast Asia?

KAUSIKAN: Well let me start with Singapore. Singapore is the only sovereign state whose population, the majority of the population are of ethnic Chinese origins. However, quite uniquely in this region, Singapore is organized horizontally on the basis of a multiracial meritocracy. It's not perfect, of course, there's no perfection to be found on earth, there's perfection only in heaven. But if you look around us, almost every country in this region is organized on the basis of ethnic or racial hierarchy, which is a vertical organizing concept. It's explicit in Malaysia, which is in Malaysian Constitution. It's more informal but nonetheless real in Indonesia, in Thailand too, in China, in Japan. Japan is a liberal democracy, but it's certainly ethnic Japanese in a hierarchical relationship with, say, Japanese of Korean or, you know, Chinese origin. So that makes it unique.

Now, I don't think Chinese, the Chinese PRC have great difficulty in wrapping their heads around the idea of ethnic majority country that does not organize, does not conceive of itself as a Chinese country. Chinese constantly refer to Singapore as a Chinese country. We asked constantly, politely, and said we are not a Chinese country, we are a multiracial country. It is an existential issue for Singapore because the foundation of all that we have achieved since 1965 is this idea of organizing yourself on the basis of multiracial meritocracy. That is the fundamental social compact on which Singapore is based. And if that compact is broken, this is a small place, and [if] it is broken it is going to be very difficult, if not impossible to put it together.



Now in Southeast Asia, as a whole, the role of the overseas Chinese is always going to be a sensitive issue, that is a fact. Unfortunate, but a fact. In 1955, the Chinese between 1949 and 1955, the Chinese Communist Party and [inaudible] were in fierce competition for the allegiance of the overseas Chinese communities of Southeast Asia. In 1955 for a variety of reasons, the Chinese Communist Party wisely, in my view, made a distinction between the *huaren*, which is the ethnic Chinese overseas which could be of any citizenship, and the *huaqiao* which is the Chinese of PRC nationality, and basically told the *huaren* to go be good citizens of your countries wherever you are.

More recently however, they have tried, they have much less distinction. The narrative of the great rejuvenation of China under the leadership of the Communist Party by which it now legitimates its rule very insistently under Xi Jinping, claims that the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is of importance [and] should be supported by all Chinese. In other words a blurring of this distinction between the *huaren* and the *huaqiao*.

Organizationally, in March this year, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office was placed under the control of the United Front Department of the Chinese Communist Party. Now I think this is rather shortsighted because if something happens in Southeast Asia to the overseas Chinese communities, which has happened—a riot, a racial riot, which unfortunately cannot be entirely ruled out—this puts the Chinese in a fix. Most recently in Malaysia, it was not the main reason why the government lost in the recent election, but it was actually one of the reasons. The opposition used this with great effect. And the Chinese ambassador in Malaysia during the election saw it fit to go and openly campaign for an ethnic Chinese candidate, government candidate. Let's say the gentleman lost the election. I don't really understand why they have decided to blur this distinction, but it is most unwise, not in China's own interest.

STROMSETH: That's very interesting and I wanted to ask you about it because I've been reading some of the press reports where you've been quoted and so on. Let's turn

now to the role of the United States. And I know you're a keen watcher of American foreign policy as well. And we've seen U.S. foreign policy toward Asia including Southeast Asia kind of evolve from at least in the last two administrations from the pivot to Asia or the rebalance policy of President Obama, to now a free and open Indo-Pacific policy of the Trump administration. The new policy seems to take a more confrontational approach toward China, at least rhetorically. And I'm wondering how you evaluate the current trends in U.S. policy, and any recommendations you might have from the Trump administration.

KAUSIKAN: Well if you look at it, I don't like the term pivot, rebalance is only slightly better because it connotes inconsistency. What works one way can be pivoted another way. But actually if you look at U.S. policy since the early 70s, what has been most evident is consistency. You are here, and I don't see any sign of you retreating. The Great Disruption of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia was the Nixon Doctrine or the Guam Doctrine in 1969. And since then, there has been fluctuations, from administration to administration, because every administration likes to distinguish themselves from the previous one even if the distinctions, are you know, minute. The free and open Indo-Pacific is the latest iteration of what has been actually a very consistent policy. I think it's useful to Indo-Pacific, insofar as it draws attention to the strategic connections between the Indian and Pacific Oceans which have always existed, but have become more, more clear in more recent years. But it's a very broad slogan. It's not entirely clear what it means. And I think they are really three clusters of questions that more Southeast Asian countries will have. First, is it inclusive concept or is it exclusive concept?

STROMSETH: You mean vis-a-vis China?

KAUSIKAN: Vis-a-vis China, vis-a-vis all countries, really, because China is part of the region, you know that's a geopolitical fact. Second, what does it mean for efforts for economic cooperation within the region? And thirdly, what does it mean for international law, a rules-based order? That is a bit of a slogan that has got a certain connotation and I

don't mean it in that way. It's a small country, obviously the more that international relations are structured on the basis of law rather than on raw power, the better. So these are three classes of questions. The ASEAN countries are still at an initial stage of formulating their own concept of what the Indo-Pacific means. We are at the pivot point between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, and surely we must have our own about what this means.

STROMSETH: When I travel to the region, I sometimes hear in the context of China's rise, also this new Indo-Pacific policy of the Trump administration. The statement from you know think tankers and others in Southeast Asia, don't make us choose, in other words, we don't want to have to choose between China and the United States. I'm wondering is this a cliché or if it's really strongly felt? How do you feel about that?

KAUSIKAN: Well there is a tendency, not just among Americans, but among many South Asians or East Asians, to think of the world in binary terms. It must be A and if not A, it must not be B, and can only be B. I don't think this really captures the complexity of a very diverse region, not just Southeast Asia ... but the broader East Asia, the Indo-Pacific. It is much more naturally a multipolar region. Now, the period of unquestioned and unchallenged American dominance and preeminence was, in historical terms, very short, maybe from 1989 to something like, what, 2008 and 2009 when the global financial crisis hit. For most of the 20th century, in fact for most of history, the world was a much more complex place and regional certainly much more complex.

When we say don't make us choose, we are trying really, at least in my mind, to instill a sense of this complexity on whoever our audience is. Look at the look at the facts. Look at investment figures, look at trade figures, look at the military presence. Yes, China's footprint is growing, that is quite natural. So but the U.S. is not disappearing. Japan is enhancing their footprint in many ways. So are the Indians. Australia is at the southern tip of this region. You have Korea too, you know, which is playing an increasing role. So it is a

complex region. It is a naturally multipolar region. In Western international relations theory, and I'm not a great fan of it, but you know, balancing, hedging, and bandwagoning are considered to be alternative strategies.

Actually in Southeast Asia we do witness all three simultaneously, and have always done so. I have never forgotten what a Vietnamese colleague once told me. He told me, I asked him, what does the change of leadership in Hanoi means for Vietnam's relations with China? And I've never forgotten his answer. His answer was look, Bilahari, every Vietnamese leader must be able to get along with China and must be able to stand up to China, and if you think you can't do both simultaneously, then you don't deserve to be the leader. And that pretty much sums up the Southeast Asia fundamental diplomatic instinct.

I'll give you two other examples, right. When President Duterte came into power in the Philippines, if you read the American media commentary you would have thought this guy is [inaudible]. But yes, he represents a streak of Filipino nationalism that is not always friendly to America, but at the same time he has kept the alliance, and has enhanced Filipino relations with America's principal ally in East Asia, Japan. Former Prime Minister Ajib has been accused of being in debt to China because of the 1MDB scandal. But he never stopped the Seventh Fleet from calling on Malaysian ports, or never stopped American surveillance aircraft flying missions over the South China Sea out of Malaysian airfields. Now this ability to do many things—walk and chew gum, possibly listen to pop music at the same time—is a natural diplomatic instinct of the region. It is too simplistic and a distortion to look at it purely by binary terms.

STROMSETH: Having lived in Hanoi for many years of my life, I appreciate and understand the comment you made about the Vietnamese colleague. Turning to ASEAN for a second. ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations comprised of 10 countries in Southeast Asia, it's sometimes a glass half full, glass half empty sort of analysis when people look at it. Some describe it as the most successful regional

organization anywhere in the world. At the same time it also is criticized for maybe not handling the South China Sea disputes more effectively or not doing more to somehow resolve the Rohingya issue say in Myanmar today. How do you assess ASEAN's performance recently and where do you see it going in the future?

KAUSIKAN: Much of the criticism of ASEAN amounts to criticizing a powerful being, an imperfect force, and that is utterly pointless. A cow is a cow and a horse is a horse, they're different kinds animals, they both have their own uses. You have to understand that ASEAN, unlike say the EU, has no supranational ambitions or very limited supranational ambitions. It is a collection of sovereign states. Sovereign states have their own interests, and therefore the organization as a whole can do no more than what the members collectively allow it to do. We do some things pretty well and some things not so well.

The fundamental purpose of ASEAN is to manage diversity, to prevent diversity from degenerating into conflict. And from that point of view, ASEAN been pretty successful and that is its fundamental purpose. In a sense everything else we do are means towards this end. In 1967, when ASEAN was considered a region, the Cold War was quite hot on the mainland of Southeast Asia. Singapore had just been expelled from Malaysia and the relationship was fraught with racial tension. Indonesia had just stopped fighting an undeclared war against Malaysia and when we left Malaysia, [Malaysia and Singapore confrontation]. The Philippines was claiming a huge chunk of Malaysia, namely Sabah. There were tensions along the border between southern Thailand and Malaysia, west Malaysia, and between southern Philippines and Indonesia. In short, the region was an utter mess. Today, we are by and large at peace with ourselves and with each other, and that is ASEAN's fundamental achievement.

As I said, there are things we can do and things we cannot do. The South China Sea has become something of a proxy for the strategic adjustments underway between

the U.S. and China. And that's a big boy's game. We can't do very much there. In an earlier period, ASEAN played a major role. When the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in the [ ]. But that too was a big ... that was a Sino-Soviet proxy conflict beyond our power to resolve. ASEAN played a not inconsequential role in preventing a fait accompli being recognized until the global constellation of major powers shifted and it was possible to have some kind of solution. So there are things we can do and things we cannot do. Sometimes we will move faster than at other times, sometimes we will not move forward on a smooth or straight trajectory. We move forward by meanderings and lurches which is not unusual in regional organizations. This is the reality. The fundamental issue is are we all better off with ASEAN or without ASEAN? I think the answer must be we're better off with ASEAN for all its imperfections. This is an imperfect world.

STROMSETH: Since the South China Sea has come up, I just want to ask quickly about the code of conduct negotiations. Where do you see these going? Are you optimistic that they will have some end that that is good for the region, good for the claimants?

KAUSIKAN: Well it's again one of those things better to have than not to have, right? If we can reduce the risk of accidents, lower tension, the very process of negotiating has a certain importance in itself. But it is not silver bullet, it is not a magic wand that will magically somehow make all the different claims go away or resolve. It's not meant to adjudicate between claims. It is meant to regulate behavior, to make it less dangerous, to ensure that the level of tension is manageable, and that's all. I mean from that point of view it is useful. When it will be concluded, I have absolutely no idea. If you recall the Declaration of Conduct in the South China Sea, it took 10 years to negotiate and the implementation guidelines for the Declaration of Conduct took a further 10 years. And certainly, the issues in the code of conduct are far more complicated than the declaration of conduct. So don't hold your breath, but there is a certain value in the process of negotiating one.

STROMSETH: Obviously as you well know, summit season is coming up soon in Asia and Southeast Asia in particular. With Singapore hosting the East Asia Summit and ASEAN meetings in November, the White House has said that President Trump won't be attending this year and will send Vice President Pence instead. And I want to just ask if you think this sends a negative signal to the region about U.S. commitment and extent of engagement going forward?

KAUSIKAN: Well yes and no. I ... prefer President Trump to come in person as he did for the Manila summit. But I think given Mr. Trump's personality and character, it is not really a surprise that he did not ... decided not to come. Besides having a very crucial midterm elections in this November, I don't know what the outcome will be. I know, you know as I do what the pundits say is often wrong, sometimes they're right, sometimes or wrong, so I am not entirely surprised. So I don't think it's not a good thing. I don't think it's fatal thing. Because as I said earlier, presidents come and go, but the U.S. presence in the region has been pretty consistent.

STROMSETH: Okay.

KAUSIKAN: I think philosophically.

STROMSETH: And you believe this to be true even in the context of "America first" and the broader approach of the Trump administration to the world?

KAUSIKAN: You know, setting aside trade for a moment, in the security and foreign policy sphere, I see as much continuity as I see ... I see far more continuity than change. Despite what Mr. Trump says or tweets, he has reaffirmed all the alliances, he has given the Seventh Fleet greater latitude to conduct freedom navigation operations in the South China Sea, that is really sensitive. He has to some degree, to a large degree, restored the credibility of American power. I think it was a huge blow, as big as cancellation of the TPP, when President Obama drew a red line in Syria and then failed to enforce it. The credibility of American power was to a large degree restored when Mr. Trump decided to bomb Syria

while having dinner with President Xi Jinping. And without credible power, there can be no leadership. So I take this philosophically. One could wish that Mr. Trump would express himself in a more calibrated way, but I tend to look at what is done, what the U.S. has actually done and not just what one individual or the other says.

STROMSETH: Do you see sort of the “America first” approach to the world including on trade as a historical anomaly or do you think it's a long term trend that, you know, as a keen watcher of the United States from Southeast Asia, is something that you can expect to see for a while?

KAUSIKAN: I think it's a symptom of a deeper and more profound phenomenon. At the end of the Cold War, a certain degree of hubris infected American foreign policies beginning with the Clinton administration. And after 9/11, that led to these interminable wars in the Middle East, which, you know, are still going on although you don't call them wars anymore. Right? This really exhausted Americans, which were already very tired after the long Cold War, it discredited the American political establishment, and led first to the election of Mr. Obama and then Mr. Trump. I think neither is going to attack me for saying this, but I think they represent different facets of the same political phenomenon.

And it's quite clear that Americans are no longer willing to bear any burden or pay any price on behalf of the rest of the world. That was clear to my mind under Mr. Obama as it is under Mr. Trump. Mr. Obama's preferred burden sharing mechanism was multilateral. Mr. Trump's is clearly bilateral. But it's different facets of the same political phenomenon. And I think this is going to be a long-term phenomenon.

Now it doesn't mean that Americans are just going to pack up, pack your bags and leave. Right? You're too deeply enmeshed in the region to leave even if you wanted to and I don't think you want to. If you look at the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, neither of which are isolationist documents, they embed a different concept of leadership, a narrower concept of leadership which, you know, the slogan, “put America



First” captures, and you can debate this concept of leadership. You can't call it a withdrawal or retreat, not accurately anyway.

STROMSETH: Well, let me turn to one last question. You recently became chairman of the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore. And I want to ask, what do you do in your new role, what issues are you focusing on, what are the important issues that connect the Middle East to Southeast Asia?

KAUSIKAN: Well I must tell you, I was responsible for starting the Middle East Institute more than a decade ago from instructions from then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. But I took my eye off the ball and it went off in an overly academic direction. So its essential function was to provide alternative perspectives on Middle Eastern issues that are relevant to Singapore and Southeast Asia. And I think there are two, two main clusters of issues that that are particularly relevant.

One is that it's been evident for the last 25, 30 years that the nature of Islam as practiced in Southeast Asia—and don't forget this is a largely Muslim region, it's got one of the largest Muslim countries in the world, Indonesia here, has been changing under the influence of different varieties of Islam from the Middle East. A phenomenon I call the Arabization of Southeast Asian Islam. Traditional, Islam has traditionally been practiced in Southeast Asia was largely Sufis, very syncretic, incorporating elements of Buddhism, Hinduism, in effect older practice, religious or animistic practices. Now this is being gradually replaced or Arabized by a more austere forms of Islam as they are practiced in some Middle Eastern countries, mainly Wahhabis or Salafis. This is changing the texture of Muslim communities of Southeast Asia, making them more exclusive, which can be a problem, because most Southeast Asian countries are plural societies, they are multicultural societies and we have to live with each other. That's one cluster of the issues.

A consequence of that, and that's still in the same first cluster, is it creates an environment that is more hospitable than previously to various violent movements. They

are not typical of Islam of course, things like al-Qaeda, Jama'a al-Islamiyya, and most recently ISIS. None of these things have anything to do with Islam, but when you have a very exclusive concept of any religion, it creates fertile soil and you see it in South Philippines in [inaudible]. I have been afraid that it might embed itself because of the Rohingya issue in Rakhine State. That is one cluster of issues.

The second cluster of issues is what happens in the Middle East? Does it exert an influence on how major power relations are regarded in this region? I gave you one example already when Obama drew a red line in Syria but failed to enforce it, was very damaging. Another example was when former President Mubarak of Egypt went in the space of one week to be a staunch ally to being an outcast, he won't even give him time of day, won't even give him the time of day and that made everybody think. It resonated with Suharto and others [ ] thought that the friend of the United States as they were treated in earlier period. China is moving into the Middle East, how it fares there will have ... know how it is regarded here. The Xinjiang issue is something that is closely watched by Muslim communities around the world including in Southeast Asia. You know governments may not want trouble but you remember how the Salman Rushdie or the Danish cartoon incidents started. It was not governments that drove it, we just need one credible imam to issue a fatwa. And things might change, right? So in this big cluster of issues, despite our best efforts to ignore the Middle East, the Middle East refuses to ignore us. And so we thought we would learn a little bit more about this region.

STROMSETH: Fantastic. Is there anything else you would like to tell our audience about Southeast Asia or U.S. Southeast Asian relations?

KAUSIKAN: Well one thing, and I'll end on that note. The state of Southeast Asia studies in the United States is, I think, on to the decline. There are younger scholars that study it, but the whole state of academia means you study narrower and narrower slices of any phenomena. This is a general phenomenon in academia globally but it does mean that

you don't take the very... that this approach may be fascinating to the scholars who study narrow slices of things like basket weaving in upper Sumatra or something like that. But it's not very useful for policy. And whether you like it or not, Southeast Asia is a strategic region in which the United States is engaged in and I think you need a broader and deeper knowledge of this region. You need to nurture another generation of broad-based scholars of Southeast Asia and that's why you know the Brookings Institution's chair on Southeast Asia can potentially play a very important role.

STROMSETH: Well thank you. I assure you we are trying our best to promote Southeast Asian studies and increase the visibility in Washington but also, as I think you're suggesting, we're increasingly engaging with the remaining academic centers that focus on Southeast Asia and make sure that there's a strong connection between the academic focus on the one hand and sort of policy analysis that's digestible to a broader audience as well. So we're doing our best.

KAUSIKAN: You know what you need to try and reestablish what used to be called regional studies. It is not fashionable in academia anymore but I think it is important and it is a pity that academia decided to discard a regional studies approach, an area studies approach.

STROMSETH: Well thank you very much for joining us. Thank you.

DEWS: "The Brookings Cafeteria" podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, including audio engineer and producer Gaston Reborado, with assistance from Mark Hoelscher. The producers are Brennan Hoban and Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews, and Jessica Pavone and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Our interns this semester are Churon Bernier and Tim Madden. Finally, my thanks to Camilla Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support. "The Brookings Cafeteria" is brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network, which also produces "Intersections" hosted by Adriana Pita, "5 on 45",

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