

## IPS Corporate Associates Lunch with Mr Bilahari Kausikan 9 May 2012

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In the international community, size does matter, said Mr Bilahari Kausikan, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), at a recent IPS Corporate Associates Lunch on 9 May 2012. How much room do small states have to manoeuvre in a global community dominated by bigger states, and can they influence the global agenda? Speaking to 30 Corporate Associates, Mr Kausikan shared his personal views on the foreign policy challenges faced by small states – states with populations of 10 million or less – like Singapore.

### ***Relevance – the “be all and end all” for small states***

Mr Kausikan reminded the audience that the constant search for relevance is at the heart of any small state’s foreign policy. Small states had to start from a premise of irrelevance, and figure out how to create and sustain their relevance in the international community, he said. This meant finding a unique economic or diplomatic space and becoming useful to states integral to one’s survival. The relevance of a small state was a constant challenge as their relevance today did not guarantee their relevance in the future. Therefore, small states would do well not by adhering to a “masterplan” for foreign policy but by understanding foreign policy as a series of improvisations to unpredictable world events, and by ensuring their enduring relevance to other states.



Mr Bilahari Kausikan speaking to IPS Corporate Associates at Orchard Hotel on 9 May 2012.

The domestic performance of a small state has an impact on how other states perceive the relevance and success of its domestic policy. If Singapore was not a successful country, then it would have “no cards to play”, said Mr Kausikan. Hence, he warned against the dangers of complacency. A fatal misstep would be for small states to believe their own propaganda, and the policies that made Singapore successful in the present may not remain so in the future. The search for Singapore’s relevance had to be a constant goal, and this would depend on the foreign ministry’s analytical skill and nimbleness in adapting to changes in the international system.

### ***Evolution of Singapore's Foreign Ministry***

Having served under half a dozen Foreign Ministers since joining MFA, Mr Kausikan responded to questions about how Singapore's foreign policy had evolved over that time. He acknowledged that Singapore's diplomatic relations had become much more institutionalised, compared to its earlier dependence on the strength of personal relationships between an earlier generation of national leaders and their international counterparts.

Today, the range of issues on which Singapore cooperated with other states was also much broader than in the past. It had become impossible for MFA to remain as Singapore's single point of contact with its foreign counterparts as MFA did not have sufficient domain knowledge on its own to pursue a positive agenda in more technically specific areas of international cooperation such as health policy. It was often necessary for MFA to engage the expertise of various policy experts. Increasingly, the role of the foreign ministry in many countries was to coordinate efforts as a broker between interdisciplinary interests, and MFA had adapted itself to this function as well. Having served under different foreign ministers in his long career at MFA, Mr Kausikan said that each minister was distinct in his style of leadership. However, while personalities might make a difference, the national interests of Singapore had not changed in its forty-seven years of being an independent nation. Understanding that a small state was intrinsically irrelevant and never losing sight of the need to sustain Singapore's relevance in the international community remained at the heart of foreign policy-making.

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### ***Speaker's Profile***

*Mr Bilahari Kausikan is currently the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He was educated at Raffles Institution, the University of Singapore and Columbia University in New York. In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he has served on the North America Desk, as First Secretary in the Singapore Embassy in Washington DC, as Director for Southeast Asia, Director for East Asia and the Pacific and as Deputy Secretary for Southeast Asia. He has also served as the Press Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and as the Ministry's Spokesman.*

*Mr Kausikan served as the Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York from 1995 to 1998 with concurrent accreditation as High Commissioner to Canada and Ambassador to Mexico. Prior to this appointment, he served as Ambassador to the Russian Federation from 1994 to 1995, with concurrent accreditation as Ambassador to Finland. In August 2001, Mr Kausikan was awarded the Public Administration Medal (Gold). In December 2002, he was awarded the "Order of Bernardo O'Higgins" with the rank of "Gran Cruz" by the President of the Republic of Chile. Mr Kausikan was the Second Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from August 2001 to August 2010.*

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