The 17th-century writings of Hugo Grotius have been fundamental in shaping modern thinking about international relations - thinking about sovereignty, the freedom of trade, and the concept of an international society of states. Today, however, as power shifts away from Western nations, the issue of what is an appropriate rules-based international order is under review.

Re-reading Grotius in his 17th-century context is vital. It shows how strongly his perspectives clashed with ideas and practices dominant in Southeast Asia at that time. It takes us back to a period before Western global domination when diplomacy had to come to terms with or confront a range and a contest of foreign-relations perspectives - just as increasingly it has to do today.

Moving forward - building regional institutions, forging new forms of engagement between major powers, defining and mediating different national interests in the South China Sea - it may be fruitful to look backward as well as ahead. Doing so offers the architects of a new order a more inclusive - less narrowly-Western - experience; and it is possible that we could also learn something valuable from the way international pluralities were navigated in an earlier era.

Peter Borschberg’s Hugo Grotius, the Portuguese and Free Trade in the East Indies (2011) is a pioneering study of Grotius’s role in the history of ideas, and the Southeast Asian context in which he wrote. His most recent book, Journal, Memorials and Letters of Admiral Cornelis Matlieff, provides us with the fascinating first-hand Dutch accounts on which Grotius relied heavily in developing his theories.

In this seminar Professor Borschberg will discuss the clash of norms and values that took place in 17th-century Southeast Asia, and then - together with Professor Lee Poh Ping and Professor Anthony Milner - lead a discussion on the relevance of this historical experience to current contests in the Asia Pacific.

Peter Borschberg was trained in the history of ideas at Cambridge University and is based at the National University of Singapore. He has written widely on issues of trade and the origins of international law in the early modern period. He has been a government consultant on issues relating to current international disputes.

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