

# Outsmarting Great Powers: Neutrals In Maritime Multipolarity | Cattelan & Dhondt

Everyone thinks neutrality means staying out of trouble. But what if it's actually about diving straight into the chaos to stay involved? We need to ask: is international law just a tool for the powerful, or can the little guys use it to strike back? To find out, I brought in Dr. Stefano Cattelan and Professor Frederick Dhondt from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. They've spent years digging into this history for their new book, *Small Power Neutrality and the Law of the Sea*, uncovering how small nations used the open ocean to outsmart the world's biggest empires. Links: [Book] *Small Power Neutrality and the Law of the Sea*: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Small-Neutrality-Eighteenth-Century-1650-1800/dp/9004724427> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascalottaz.substack.com> (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: <https://pascalottaz.substack.com/s/academic>) Merch & Donations: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction & Book Motivation 00:02:59 Origins of Maritime Neutrality & International Law 00:10:57 Trade, Profit, and Political Necessity 00:16:09 Contraband, Dual-Use Goods, and Neutral Rights 00:27:33 Unlikely Actors & Situational Neutrality 00:41:43 Modern Lessons for Small Powers

## #Pascal

Welcome back, everybody. Today we're talking about my favorite topic—neutrality. I've got with me Dr. Stefano Cattelan and Professor Frederik Dhondt from the Faculty of Law and Criminology at the Vrije University of Brussels. The two recently published an edited book called *\*Small Power Neutrality and the Law of the Sea in the Long 18th Century, 1650–1800\**. That's what we want to discuss today. So, Stefano, Frederik, welcome.

## #Cattelan

Hi, Pascal. Hi, everyone, and thank you very much for the kind introduction. Shall I start, Frederik, or would you like to?

## #Pascal

Maybe, Stefano, why don't you start? Tell us a little bit about the motivation for this book, and maybe how it came together.

## #Cattelan

Of course. So basically, the story of this book is that Frederik and I have been working together for the last four years in Brussels at the Université de Bruxelles on a project about the interplay between

neutrality and the law of the sea in the long 18th century. I first came to Brussels in 2022 with a Casberg Foundation Internationalization Fellowship, and then the project continued—or is continuing—for three more years, thanks to funding from the FWO, the Research Foundation of Flanders. The whole idea of the project, and also of the book, is to merge my own research interests—my background as a legal historian working on the law of the sea and its development in the early modern period—with Frederik's expertise, which focuses on, though not exclusively, diplomatic history and legal-diplomatic argumentation in the 18th century and beyond.

So basically, the whole idea was for us to merge what we do from, let's say, slightly different backgrounds, but still within the larger field of legal history, and to meet and combine our expertise. This book, in particular, is also the result of an international symposium we organized in Paris in 2023 at the Fondation Birman-Laporte, where we gathered historians and legal historians to think about small-power neutrality, with a focus on maritime neutrality—both from a legal-historical, but also an economic-historical and, you know, broadly historical perspective. And this endeavor is continuing to this day, as we're now planning a new conference at the end of this year.

## #Pascal

You know, this is wonderful. Right now, we're witnessing a very difficult time for international law—just to connect a little bit with what's happening at the moment, with the United States attacking Venezuela. And, you know, we see a lot of things crumbling. But this shouldn't make us forget that, at the end of the day, international law isn't about imposing something from the top; it's about how rules actually develop from the bottom up. So, Frederik, could you maybe talk a bit about this? Because I think one of your contributors, Stephen Neff, makes that point. And maybe you can also explain why neutrality is a maritime concept. Most people think of it as something that applies on land, but it actually originates at sea—at least in the way we understand it in international law today. Could you talk a little about that?

## #Dhondt

Thank you. Well, that's a lot of things together in one question, I would say. As it happens, I've just been going through your book *\*Notions of Neutralities\**, and Stephen Neff's excellent chapter on American conceptions of neutrality in the 1930s is a good illustration of the dilemmas you highlighted in the first question. International law is not fully codified; it evolves with the behavior of the actors who need to accept the norms they abide by. And I think that this is the reason why we've been able to work on a topic like neutrality for this period.

If we go back to Stephen Neff's fundamental work on the rights and duties of neutrals, published in the early 2000s, we see a gradual evolution, right? In the 19th and late 19th centuries, the rules became more detailed or more fixed, but the law of neutrality was never really cast in stone. It's always subject to legal interpretation—by judges, by thinkers—and it's used in practice by diplomats, of course. The broader power dynamics also influence it. And if you look at the world we see today,

the question remains: is it might, or is it right? It's an eternal dilemma in the history of international law.

When I started working on this period—the first half of the 18th century—my focus was on France, on French diplomacy, and neutrality really didn't come into the picture. I was studying how the French and the British tried to amend the international order after the Peace of Utrecht in 1713. It was only when studying the case of Belgium in the 19th century, in a postdoc project on permanent neutrality, that I started getting interested in the concept of neutrality as a lawyer or as a legal historian. Why? Because maintaining one's neutrality is a result of physical capabilities—you must be able to deter potential aggressors.

But the right to declare oneself neutral is a contested issue in the early modern period—the period that precedes the 19th century. And the link between neutrality and sovereignty is quite attractive, quite alluring. I think we've been able to nuance the general image of this a bit in our introduction and in the volume as a whole. If you look at the index of concepts, we have 21 different associations with the word "neutrality," and we deliberately chose not to make a choice there. The right to be neutral is the right to choose between being a belligerent and not being one.

And that is also linked to either a more horizontal or a more hierarchical vision of the agency of actors in the international arena. Depending on your point of view, you come to a different definition of neutrality and of the rights and obligations it entails. So Stephen F. famously classified three schools of neutrality in the early modern period, and he elaborates further on that in the concluding article of our volume. Those schools are an attempt by doctrine to classify something that is horribly complex in practice, and the merit of our volume, I think, is—as Stefano has indicated—to bring together various expertises to construct the interpretation of norms from the bottom up.

I think a common point with the book *\*Notions of Neutrality\** is that we're trying to uncover how players in a strategic big game formulate their positions using the word "neutrality," and use it as a vehicle to further their own interests. The more you go into detail—as we see in the contributions by Victor Wilson, John Freeman, or Christian Fister—the more different actors we meet: private individuals, corporations, local authorities. Neutrality then becomes a lens through which to look at a very complex reality. And that, I think, goes even beyond the legal paradigm and makes the book so interesting and fascinating.

## #Pascal

Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this could happen again at any time. So please consider subscribing not only here but also to my mailing list on Substack—that's [pascallottaz.substack.com](https://pascallottaz.substack.com). The link will be in the description below. And now, back to the video. Thank you. Stefan, what do you want to add to this one?

## #Cattelan

Yeah, maybe I can add something on the maritime dimension of the historical genesis of neutrality, and also why the book is basically focused on maritime neutrality. It's just, yeah, because as you rightly pointed out, the genesis of neutrality as we know it—of early modern neutrality—was very much linked to the sea. And, let's say, the best reflections of the 18th century on neutrality were actually devoted to what was happening at sea, in a century that saw the expansion of seaborne trade—both, let's say, short-term trade across Europe, cabotage techniques, but also, let's say, long-range intercontinental commerce.

And indeed, as someone like Erik Zurcher, who wrote a masterful book on early modern neutrality, *\*Anthropologie RLAP\**, also pointed out, maritime neutrality is very different from land neutrality. Land neutrality basically tries to preserve a territory and a population from war and from harm done by the belligerents, while maritime neutrality is much more about commerce—an attempt by neutrals to profit from the state of war and from the fact that, in theory, they're able to trade more smoothly compared to the belligerents. So again, it's really a different type of neutrality, and one that was at the heart of the initial reflection on what the neutral status actually is.

## #Pascal

This is one of the things I find so fascinating—you know, that a lot of people misunderstand neutrality and then point and say, "Oh, but these neutrals, they trade with everybody. They're not neutral; they're trying to profit." Oh yeah, really? No, that's just what they do, that's just what they assert. Maybe, Frederick, Stefano, whoever wants to jump in—can you talk a little bit about the connection between trade and remaining neutral?

## #Dhondt

If I may jump in on that, it's an old debate, of course. The dominant power at sea generally does not like neutral trade, because neutral trade allows its opponents to make up for their lack of physical strength or to meet resource needs through neutral trading vessels. And that's only part of the ambiguity of end-on trade—that's the classical reproach. However, it's very difficult to disentangle the political and commercial aspects of neutrality. If we look at the chapter by John Freeman on the Duchy of Courland, it's quite clear that the Duke of Courland, a minor secondary player in the Baltic and in northeastern Europe, is asked to be present, for instance, in the West Indies, in the Caribbean, because some kind of similar go-between player is necessary for maintaining the overall balance of the system in another sphere of the world.

If you were to project, and the picture could come up here—our index of places on Google Maps—you'd see that the contributions in our volume, although based on European archival sources, actually cover the globe. It's a way to project power to other parts of the world and to balance relations between European powers present elsewhere. And benefiting from trade is sometimes the main reason neutrals are viewed with a certain unease by bigger players, but sometimes it's not that at all—there are other reasons as well.

And the chapter by Victor Wilson, for instance, on the Caribbean in the late 18th century and during the Napoleonic Wars, is also a good illustration of that. Those two aspects are closely intertwined, and I think the volume would have been a lot less interesting if we had left out that dimension. The legal idea is that neutrals have to restrain what they would normally be allowed to do in a situation of war because they are trading with belligerents, and it's easy to see them as failing in their duty of impartiality. That's part of the picture, but there are other systemic needs and causes that make neutral powers sometimes necessary to keep a regional system working.

## #Pascal

Thank you. And may I just clarify—like the map that I'm showing now, or the one superimposed here—you pointed out several places with pins, a lot of them in Europe, but also one in Russia, one in China, and one in Indonesia. Do they represent all the places where you found neutral trade?

## #Dhondt

Just in the corpus and footnotes of the book, all the places mentioned come from a variety of sources and cases. If you look at it from a legal point of view, we have doctrine, treaties, and local case law. For instance, in the chapter by Leo Smuller, he discusses cases from the prize courts in Britain. They don't necessarily indicate neutral trade, but they show places that are relevant for the development of neutrality discourses by various actors.

Neutrality is like the oil in the machine of the international system in the early modern period—to use a French expression—in a world where the intermediate walls had already fallen long before the globalization of the 1990s or even before the Belle Époque. The economic world system was already in place; continents were already connected. But there were also political reasons why neutrals appeared in those theaters. And sometimes, as in the case of Crudup, we have a foot in Africa, a foot in the Caribbean, and a foot in the Baltic—in a way you'd only expect nowadays from a multinational corporation, with one company in Pakistan, one in California, and one in Sweden, so to speak.

## #Pascal

So, in a sense, the objective of belligerents—especially the dominant belligerent or the dominant sea power—is always to shut down the trade of the opponent or opponents. Whereas the interest of neutrals is always to maintain as much trade with anyone as they can. And usually what we see is trade flowing in very interesting ways, with neutrals actually starting to assert their right to trade toward belligerents. Stefano, do you maybe have in your book a couple of examples of this? Yeah, yeah.

## #Cattelan

Thank you very much, Pascal. And yeah, it's also one of the interesting aspects, I would say, of the book—that it shows, in a way, neutrality in motion, in action. In the sense that we're not talking about the same neutrality or the same agency of small powers throughout the book. For example, in my case, I investigate more the Dano-Norwegian and Swedish neutrality during the wars at the end of the 17th century—the Nine Years' War and the War of the Spanish Succession—when both Denmark-Norway and Sweden still had very powerful naval fleets of their own. They were basically able, especially during the Nine Years' War, to shut down the belligerents from entering the Baltic Sea.

And they have, thanks also to their military might—which is relatively considerable—been able to negotiate at the same time with both France and Germany, the Allies, the Anglo-Dutch, finding ways to profit from war with this idea of deterrence: that they could align with one of the belligerents and slightly change the balance of sea power in Northern Europe. And, of course, this is a very different situation from, for example, the period covered by the chapter by Leos Muller at the end of the 18th century, when Great Britain was much more dominant at sea, even though still challenged by France and, you know, by the Bourbon alliance in Europe. But let's say it was able to impose much more its own views on the law of the sea and on the rules of maritime neutrality—for example, in relation to contraband and blockade.

And, for example, in relation to contraband, Great Britain—British authorities and the Court of Admiralty—tried over and over again to push a broader notion of contraband, including foodstuffs and naval stores, basically everything needed to build and maintain a fleet of gigantic wooden vessels. So again, we can describe this period covered in the book—the mid-17th and 18th centuries—as one of constant change in the balance of power between neutrals and great powers, with this long-term trend of the ascendancy of Great Britain as the most powerful sea power. And of course, we tried in the book not to take an Anglo-centric perspective, in the sense that there's already quite a lot written from a British point of view and, you know, the whole idea of dominion over the seas and "Britannia rules the waves," etc.

We tried, you know, to take more the perspective of small and medium powers—to, um, let's say, complete the picture a bit—and also, you know, to include the point of view of France as the power that was usually, uh, fighting Great Britain from a disadvantage, at least at sea. And so it's also very interesting, especially for my chapter, to study the strategies developed by France through diplomacy, as a sort of *\*diplomatie de la neutralité\**, to compensate for British superiority at sea—mobilizing, or trying to mobilize, the neutrals to trade and to keep France supplied in times of war.

## #Pascal

An observation and a question. One of the observations is that this game—this cat-and-mouse game—keeps continuing, right? The idea of contraband, you know, in international law, refers to something very specific: goods that can be used for military purposes. In today's world, what we see is that states talk about dual-use goods. It's kind of the new expression to describe something very

similar. And what we usually see is that belligerents try to expand the list of contraband or dual-use goods in order to constrain trade.

Whereas the neutrals try to say, like, no, no, no—gunpowder, okay, that's contraband. But apples and grapes and wine—if you argue that you can use that to supply troops, then you're really taking it too far. But we see that going on. And maybe you can speak about that a little bit, give some examples. Then secondly—and now I forgot my second question—maybe it was about the contraband and dual-use issue. Does something come to mind? Maybe Stefan, and then Frederik?

## #Cattelan

Yeah, I can briefly add that, of course, it was already a concern at the time. For example, what about horses that can be used in war but also in civilian life, so to speak, or in the fields, etc.? And also, you know, the different types of wood—some of them could be used to build houses rather than ships, but still could sometimes be used in ships. So again, we really see that the law of neutrality, for most of the 18th century, was based on this web of bilateral treaties of friendship, commerce, and navigation, right? Those had different provisions on, for example, contraband.

Of course, they were not always super clear, and there was, you know, a margin for interpretation. Especially as the 18th century goes on, for example, the British Admiralty forced this interpretation to include more and more materials that would not have been initially considered contraband. And we also saw throughout the 18th century cases where, for example, there was a famine in France during the Nine Years' War, or the Grand Famine of 1709 during the War of the Spanish Succession, and the Anglo-Dutch basically decided that foodstuffs—grain—would be considered contraband.

And they tried, you know, to force this view on the neutrals, who, on the other hand, tried to fight back—peacefully, let's say. They tried to organize convoys, for example, to keep bringing Baltic grain to France. But the English or the Dutch, if they encountered a Swedish or Danish convoy carrying grain, would seize it and pay the value of the cargo to the Danes, Norwegians, or Swedes—basically stopping it from reaching France and forcing them to sell that grain to Britain instead. So again, we really see this notion of contraband, and how the broader idea of neutrality changes with the shifting balance of power at sea.

## #Pascal

Frederick, do you have anything to add to that?

## #Dhondt

Yes, well, essentially, as Stefano said at the end, this is a decentralized story. Traditionally, for trade in the early modern period, we need to take into account corruption and the non-application of norms. I'm thinking of the wonderful chapter by Christian Pister Longanet on the inspection reports

of the Amirautés—the French admiralty tribunals along the coast. But this decentralized reality is, in a certain sense, if we look at the normative structure of the international system today, still highly instructive.

What we see when the Security Council is at a deadlock, as with Ukraine, is that all kinds of horizontal structures and interpretations of norms that would otherwise have been violated are used by states to try to establish their own systems. The criticism directed at British principles like the Rule of 1756 is not unlike what we saw in the 18th century. And this reality—of, I would maybe not use the expression “states of different jurisdictions,” but rather states using their own style in reading the web of bilateral treaties—also creates opportunities for individuals and other actors to achieve their practical ends.

And if we look at it this way, there is an important difference—complementary elements to a textbook overview of big concepts. Because in reality, it's the practical strategy of the actor who wants to achieve an aim that comes first, and this can be neutrality, but it can also be something else. And that is highly fascinating. Again, if you look at the map, if you look at the concepts we've identified throughout the book that have been relevant to tell this story, you can also connect it with economic history, maybe urban history, social history, and other approaches to reading a very complex past.

And that is the key, I think. Neutrality is a way of looking at the international system—of looking at it without the predefined actors and categories we tend to position in our minds, following the development of IR theory in the 20th century, for instance. It's like traveling to another country when you go into the past. And that also has consequences for your reading and your analytical tools. On the other hand, it helps you identify recurrences and similarities that one might not have thought of at first.

## #Pascal

Thank you very much for that. One of the mistakes is to think that for international law to work, you need a structure first and then everybody needs to abide by it. The point is, structure emerges out of the way actors interact with each other, even when great powers try to put a lot of stress on it, crack down, and destroy. What you find, if you look at neutrality as an analytical framework, is that there are always actors that try to pop up and make use of the spaces this actually creates. Stefano, do you maybe have an example of a couple of these unlikely neutral actors? And maybe also a question—neutrality not as a hard legal concept but as an analytical tool to understand actors. I mean, where was that handy in the book?

## #Cattelan

Well, probably also talking about the subjects—or, let's say, the actors—we cover in the book, it's certainly very interesting to see how different types of neutrality come to be. That's the case, for

example, with Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, which are often neutral but also often fighting in European wars. So, for example, with Germany, the Nordic actors show a type of neutrality that is not yet a long-term choice but rather, let's say, an opportunistic way of trying to profit from the state of war and also to expand their commerce and wealth. Of course, as you know, Sweden will later evolve into a sort of permanent, long-term neutrality.

But let's say, throughout the 18th century, they are both neutral and belligerent. For example, in the first two decades of the 18th century, Sweden is neutral in the War of the Spanish Succession, but at the same time one of the major belligerents—or one of the central actors—in the Great Northern War. And this is, of course, a very different case from that of the Duchy of Courland, treated by John Freeman, where we actually see that neutrality is simply a basic necessity for such a small duchy, enclaved between great powers like France, the Swedish Empire of the time, Russia, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which was still one of the most powerful states in Europe.

So basically, we see different types of actors and very different types of neutrality. And now, for the final part of the project, for example, I'm focusing on the Republic of Venice, which is also a very interesting case because it's a more passive, let's say, type of neutrality compared to the Dano-Norwegian and the Swedish ones. Venice is often fighting the Ottoman Turks, so it really needs peace as much as possible in northern Italy to be able to focus the limited resources it has. By the 17th century, it's no longer a great power across the Mediterranean, but still a very significant maritime power and a very significant diplomatic actor in broader European diplomacy.

So basically, you know, you see this policy of being very flexible, but at the same time of successfully managing to preserve the territory of the Republic from basically being eaten up by the Austrian Empire or by France, which already at the time are maneuvering to see what they can take in Italy. And, as you know, it will be the end of the history of the Republic of Venice—its fate will be decided by the sort of Austrian-French understanding with the Treaty of Campo Formio. So basically, we see different actors trying to adapt their neutral policies to their contingent situations and to the asymmetry of power with the great powers they interact with. And yeah.

## #Pascal

One thing that's so interesting is this kind of situational neutrality—being neutral toward one conflict but not another. This was actually the standard for many, many centuries, right? And actually, international law as we have it today, and the case law we have, but also the treaty law—most of it pertains to situational neutrality. Frederick, can you maybe talk about this a little bit? You know, this idea that one is always either neutral or never neutral—that's not what the last four or five hundred years of history teach us.

## #Dhondt

Well, we—uh, you're freezing up a little bit. Can you repeat that, please?

## #Dhondt

This book by Gaspard Réal de Courbon—mm-hmm—who was a French legal author from the 1740s and early 1750s. Réal de Courbon, in the fifth volume of his work *\*La science du gouvernement\**, specifically in the volume *\*Le droit des gens\**—so, the law of nations, not *\*Le droit de la nature\** but *\*Le droit des gens\**—gives a detailed reasoning on how the law of neutrality is intertwined with what he calls *\*le droit de la convenance\**, or what powers can impose on others. This balance is described in a very detailed way in our introduction, and it highlights the ambivalence of the link between neutrality and sovereignty, or agency, or the capacity to act independently.

And if we go to my chapter on the position of the Dutch Republic—as a middle power, a mediator between the great powers in the War of the Polish Succession—you see that this is an example of a polity we can't really classify as small. The Dutch Republic was one of the major maritime powers in the 17th century, but it was torn between two options: either France or Britain, to put it very simply. In the War of the Polish Succession—which is somewhat about Poland, but not in most of the theaters or affairs concerned—the Dutch Republic and Britain tried to mediate between the belligerents, France and the Habsburg monarchy.

France, plus Spain and Sardinia-Piedmont. The Dutch Republic, as is often said, as a neutral power—when it is neutral—can host a peace conference. It's a place where news circulates, where one can influence public opinion across Europe in the early modern period. But the Dutch know that the choice they make—to remain neutral or not—is dictated by what we would call today national interest, or simply by necessity. They constantly receive offers from various parties to take a side. And in the 18th century, when their own geopolitical and physical security is at stake, the Dutch Republic is afraid—they're afraid of a conflict with France.

The Habsburg monarchy—since the emperor controls the southern Low Countries, since they still have neighbors in Germany, and since there was a problem with East Frisia. And they're very jealous of keeping their commercial privileges. For instance, as they argue, they have exclusive access to the East Indies, where they want to exclude competitors—like the Ostend Company, created in 1722 in the Austrian Low Countries. Their position is not one of strength. And legally, if the Dutch Republic opts for neutrality, it is a decision not to take part in a conflict between two others. Being able to choose—that is a sign of neutrality, the degree to which one is autonomous.

It's not easy for minor powers in the Holy Roman Empire to do that. For instance, when a Reichskrieg—an imperial war—is declared, you can't just stay neutral once the emperor and the empire together at the Diet have taken a side. It's hard for small polities, and Le Courban describes, for example, that the Bishop of Passau can't do much when one of the big players in the region decides to occupy his territory. Now, if a middle power that's seen as capable of choosing neutrality takes that status, there are risks involved. If you don't stick to what is later theorized as the duty of impartiality and abstention, you can become a belligerent and be dragged into a war.

The Dutch want to avoid it at any cost. So any profiteering during the War of the Polish Succession—I'm not aware of specific studies that have looked into this—would have been very limited. And as you point out, it's not necessarily the case that a polity consistently opts for neutrality. We have the example of Liège, for instance, or the long-term neutrality of Venice, and in the case of the Dutch Republic, when they do go to war, it's usually alongside Britain, in what we call the maritime powers, as a kind of alliance during the War of the Spanish Succession. The Dutch Republic upheld neutrality when Britain was at war in the War of the Quadruple Alliance.

And there they are accused of profiteering and free riding, while Britain and France are in it for everyone—by invading Britain, punishing the King of Spain for aggression in Italy. In the War of the Polish Succession, Britain and the Dutch Republic both remain aloof, and the French know they somehow have to bribe the Dutch into doing this. This is the famous convention of neutralization of the Austrian Low Countries, whereby not the sovereign of the Austrian Low Countries, not the Duke of Brabant, not the Count of Flanders, not the Emperor, but France—as its potential opponent, as a future belligerent—promises the Dutch Republic, a third party, not to pass through the Austrian Low Countries.

This is called the Convention of Neutralization in the later literature. But of course, it's quite a different type of neutrality from that of an actor who voluntarily decides to stay out of a conflict. It's more a convention for delimiting a war theater or war zone by a future belligerent preparing to start a conflict with the Habsburg monarchy. If you reverse the perspective, when there's a mediation attempt, the pensionary—who is the main political actor in the Dutch Republic—holds secret talks at his house, using the ambiguity of his position. The Dutch Republic is a hub for news, where information can circulate very quickly throughout Europe.

The major powers have their diplomatic representatives, so the risk of a leak is quite considerable. On the other hand, the Dutch want peace, but in reality, they're afraid that their own geopolitical security might be endangered later. And, okay, they clearly have the capability to choose not to be in the conflict. But still, the pressure on them is quite considerable. If you look at trade and other forms of neutrality, or at the small essential parts of the system that make everything work, the dossier that comes up there is that of Livorno, where the French promised they would do their utmost to recognize that Livorno is a free port when Italy needs to be rearranged.

That has traditionally been seen by economic historians from the perspective of free ports and small zones that make the system work. Why does it come up here? Because the neutral power is not acting for peace pro bono, but is trying to gain some kind of advantage from a diplomatic deal. And that's an aspect we certainly shouldn't forget. Neutrality does not exist in abstracto. Trade and maritime aspects have their own concepts and reasoning. But in the end, if a political decision has to be made, it's both the foot one has on land and the foot one has on a ship on the high seas that make up the whole corpus of the political lecture being considered.

**#Pascal**

Thank you very much. This is very, very useful information. You know, the number of cases we can look at is huge—much more than one would think. Stefan, maybe we can also close with this question to both of you: what are the main learning outcomes from your book? If you had to name a couple of things that are still relevant today, in 2026, what would they be? What reminds you most, from what you've studied in this volume, of how the world works today?

## #Cattelan

Well, I guess we're in a moment in history where the nature—the very existence—of international law is being questioned more and more by many actors. For example, these days I hear a lot of talk about spheres of influence and how the great powers are once again trying to carve out new spheres of influence, where countries like Japan or the European Union as a whole are supposed to be part of the spheres of influence of bigger actors. The volume, I would say, simply shows that international law is not something fixed or permanent. It's really a language of understanding—a language that needs to be negotiated constantly. And at the same time, smaller actors also have a lot of agency in shaping it and in pushing back against the will of the great powers, which, of course, remain very important and leading voices in the international community.

But at the same time, you know, the system cannot work only through their actions. Smaller actors—or even very big players like the EU, which sometimes forgets how powerful it could be—have a lot of room to maneuver and to exist. And of course, countries like Switzerland continue to play a very important role on the international scene. So I would say the whole message of the book is to study not only neutrality but also international law in motion, in action, as something that continues to change and where smaller actors also have a huge part to play.

## #Pascal

Maybe, Frederick, just to end—today I know there are a couple of people who are very interested in this. Indonesia, for instance, Malaysia, for instance—non-aligned actors that we traditionally didn't study as neutrals. But I know that these people are now studying neutrality because they understand they're in that web. From the book and from what you studied, what would be your recommendation to smaller actors that still have the ability to keep some form of neutrality, one way or another?

## #Dhondt

Thank you. Well, I would refer them to the beautiful chapter by Nora Nagy-Pleerberg on Martin Huebner, and the way in which, as a small actor, you can construct a coherent and convincing conceptual canvas—starting from general principles and deductively explaining why it's important

that your rights, as a neutral state or as a subject of a neutral nation, be respected for the sake of international law as a whole. Within the law of neutrality, there are various options and strands one can draw on to argue for one's position.

But the articulation that Huebner uses of neutral rights, and the precedence that the normal state of affairs—so, freedom of trade between sovereign actors—ought to prevail, I think is important. It's admirable. And the case made there by a lawyer from the north of Germany, working for the king of Denmark, can also be useful in all settings, appealing to human reason as something specific to the 18th century Enlightenment and to our common legal culture and consciousness in international law today.

## **#Cattelan**

Thank you. Stefano, anything to add to this? Yeah, maybe just to close—the whole idea that neutrality is really relational, not absolute. It constantly builds through this relationship between the practices of the great powers and the smaller or medium players. And it can also be defined not only as abstention, but as a kind of language, a bit of resistance—resistance to the will of the great powers.

## **#Pascal**

That's a very good way of closing this. It's actually also an expression of the ability to do something different—to be on your own side instead of picking between two. This was very enlightening. And everybody, if you want to get the book, I'll put the link in the description below. If you want to know something specific or get some advice, reach out to Stefano and Frederik—they're also great. You can find them on their university homepages. Stefano Catalan, Frederik Dond, thank you very much for your time today. Thank you very much, Pascal Lottaz.

## **#Dhondt**

Thank you for the invitation.

## **#Pascal**

Thank you.