



# Unpacking Contestation in Southeast Asia's Renewable Energy Development

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	1
Introduction.....	2
Local Opposition and State Responses .....	2
<i>Indonesia</i> .....	3
<i>Malaysia</i> .....	4
<i>Thailand</i> .....	6
<i>Lao PDR</i> .....	7
Implications for Energy Governance and Regional Cooperation .....	8
About the Authors .....	9
About the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre).....	9
About the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies .....	10

## **Executive Summary**

Southeast Asian countries are accelerating renewable energy development to meet increasing domestic energy needs and contribute to global decarbonisation efforts. With the move towards expanding renewable energy, tensions between the state and affected communities risk intensifying, which, if unmanaged, could undermine the legitimacy of the projects themselves and the long-term viability of the energy transition agenda. This challenge becomes even more salient in the context of cross-border power trade as importing countries will seek to ensure that their electricity purchases are not sourced from projects marred by social conflict and environmental controversy. Understanding the dynamics between the state and local contestation is essential for designing renewable energy development strategies and regional energy cooperation frameworks that facilitate the region's transition to renewable energy sources in an environmentally, socially and politically credible way.

## Introduction

ASEAN has set ambitious targets of a 30% share of renewable energy sources in total primary energy supply, and a 45% renewable energy share in installed capacity, by 2030.<sup>1</sup> To achieve such objectives, regional power interconnectivity through the ASEAN Power Grid (APG) plays a pivotal role in connecting areas with abundant renewable energy sources to those with limited potential across the region. Yet, renewable energy projects have increasingly become sites of contestation, given that their development often has ecological and social repercussions on surrounding communities.

This policy report investigates how four Southeast Asian countries that are integral to Singapore's energy import strategy – Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Lao PDR – respond to local contestation over renewable energy projects. The report highlights cases where state-community interactions are observable, illustrating how the ways states govern and maintain authority influenced their responses to opposition. The analysis finds that although community protests rarely stop projects, they can shape the path of implementation, either through repression, procedural accommodation or deferral. As Southeast Asia continues renewable energy expansion, ensuring social equity and environmental stewardship is key to making the future of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community sustainable.

## Local Opposition and State Responses

Across Southeast Asia, resentment towards renewable energy infrastructure projects stems from several common drivers. These include disruptions to livelihoods such as farming or fishing caused by environmental degradation, forced displacement and inadequate or poorly implemented compensation schemes. Equally important are the lack of genuine consultation and participatory processes with affected communities, and a prevailing injustice, where the projects primarily serve distant investors, corporations and urban consumers, while local communities bear the costs and benefit disproportionately far less from the projects.

Depending on how affected communities understand these issues and what the political and legal contexts allow, they may employ various strategies of resistance, such as protests, petitions, legal actions and media campaigns, to amplify their grievances and mobilise action. The state, in turn, may react in different ways. It can exercise repression by using force and violence, intimidation, arrests, interrogations or criminal charges against protesters. The state can engage in delay or avoidance, for example by deferring project implementation to review the plan or conduct further studies. It may also employ co-optation, drawing protest or community leaders into its networks through incentives, appointments or partnerships. Alternatively, the state may accommodate community demands by revising project designs, updating

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<sup>1</sup> ASEAN Centre for Energy, *ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation (APAEC): 2026–2030*. ASEAN Centre for Energy, Jakarta, 2025, <https://aseanenergy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/APAEC-2026-2030.pdf>

procedures, offering better compensation packages or halting or relocating the project elsewhere.

## **Indonesia**

In Indonesia, opposition to renewable energy projects can be seen in an ongoing geothermal power plant development in Poco Leok, located in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) Province of Flores Island, which was designated “geothermal island” in 2017 in line with then President Joko Widodo’s 35 gigawatt (GW) national energy programme.<sup>2</sup> The central authority, through the National Electricity Company (PT PLN) and with funding from German Development Bank (KfW), planned to build in Poco Leok the 40 megawatt (MW) Ulumbu geothermal power plant, labelled a project of strategic national importance (Proyek Strategis Nasional/PSN). The decree officiating the development was signed by the regent of Manggarai in 2022, but the project sparked resistance from indigenous people in 10 affected villages, supported by leaders of the Catholic Church in the area and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the Mining Advocacy Network (JATAM). Protesters expressed their objections through rallies, blockades and public statements, including a joint letter issued by five Catholic bishops in March 2025 and a more recent rally staged on World Environment Day on 5 June 2025.

The state has reportedly responded with a series of repressive measures. In late November 2023, some military and police officers deployed to accompany PLN officials on their visit to the Poco Leok geothermal mining site were said to have assaulted locals who protested against their arrival.<sup>3</sup> In October 2024, police officers again responded to a demonstration with violence, leaving several protesters injured.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, during the 5 June 2025 rally, protesters were harassed by Manggarai regent Herybertus Nabit’s loyalists, prompting a community leader to file a lawsuit against him in September 2025.<sup>5</sup>

The state’s response appears to contradict Indonesia’s democratic character, which allows space for freedom of expression. Furthermore, the dispersed authority across multiple governance layers, which is an outcome of Indonesia’s post-1998 decentralisation, produced overlapping jurisdictions and rent-seeking networks that have created entry points for societal members to bargain with local elites, potentially resulting in the state being more accommodating of their interests. Yet, as the Poco Leok case shows, the Ulumbu geothermal project’s status as a PSN re-activated central

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<sup>2</sup> Dagur, Ryan, “Indigenous People Sue Indonesian Regent over Geothermal Conflict”, *UCA News*, 8 September 2025, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/indigenous-people-sue-indonesian-regent-over-geothermal-conflict/110208>.

<sup>3</sup> Forum-Asia, “Indonesia: Indigenous Group Met with Police Violence”, Asian HRDs Portal, last modified 25 November 2023, <https://asianhrds.forum-asia.org/en/entity/4fcphagj1ed>.

<sup>4</sup> UCA News, “Indonesia: Groups Condemn Police Crackdown on Demonstration against Geothermal Project”, reproduced in Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2 October 2024, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/indonesia-groups-condemn-police-crackdown-on-demonstration-against-geothermal-project/>.

<sup>5</sup> Dagur, “Indigenous People Sue Indonesian Regent”.

oversight and overrode local resistance through political pressure and coordinated security action, executed by local state authorities.

A similar pattern was observed on Rempang Island, where land amounting to 7,000 hectares was to be turned into an eco-city, tourism centre and industrial zone featuring quartz and solar panel factories in support of the development of the country's renewable energy technology supply chain.<sup>6</sup> The project was reportedly also linked to Indonesia's plan to export solar-powered electricity to Singapore by 2030.<sup>7</sup> Like Poco Leok, Rempang Island was designated as a PSN. In late 2023, Rempang residents protested the plan on the grounds of forced eviction from their ancestral land and the lack of free, prior, and informed consent. The security apparatus responded to their opposition with teargas, rubber bullets and water cannons.<sup>8</sup> The state's purported repressive measures were contested, with officials from BP-Batam, the local investment agency in charge of Rempang Island development, denying all allegations,<sup>9</sup> while Walhi, a leading environmental NGO in Indonesia, claimed that Rempang residents continued to experience violent evictions.<sup>10</sup> As of late 2024, Susiwiyono Moegiarso, secretary of the Coordinating Ministry for the Economy, affirmed that Rempang project would proceed regardless of local resistance.<sup>11</sup> This case again underscores Indonesia's fragmented yet centralised power structure, where local contestation may emerge but is bounded by the central government's capacity to rein in dissent, particularly in the name of national interest.

## Malaysia

Local opposition to renewable energy infrastructure in Malaysia can be seen in the case of the Bakun Hydroelectric Project (BHP) development. Following the Malaysian cabinet's approval of the project in September 1993, three indigenous people sued Ekran Berhad, the company managing the dam at that time, the director-general of Environment, the federal government and relevant state authorities in Sarawak over procedural violations of the Environmental Quality Act 1974, particularly the denial of public access to and participation in the environmental impact assessment (EIA)

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<sup>6</sup> Renaldi, Adi, "Rempang Residents Say 'For Generations, We've Lived Here and Will Die Here'", Pulitzer Center, 1 December 2023. <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/remgang-residents-say-generations-weve-lived-here-and-will-die-here>.

<sup>7</sup> See: Sahputra, Yogi Eka, "Tensions Flare as Indonesian Islanders Resist China Solar Development", *Mongabay*, 10 October 2024, <https://news.mongabay.com/2024/10/tensions-flare-as-indonesian-islanders-resist-china-solar-development/>; Soeriaatmadja, Wahyudi, "Indonesia Promises Better Relocation Package for Islanders after Clashes over Chinese Project", *The Straits Times*, 14 November 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-promises-better-relocation-package-for-islanders-after-clashes-over-chinese-project>

<sup>8</sup> Renaldi, Adi, "Rempang Residents Say".

<sup>9</sup> Gunawan, Candra, "DPR dan Pemerintah Diharapkan Beri Kejelasan Status PSN Rempang", *Gokepri.com*, 1 May 2025, <https://gokepri.com/dpr-dan-pemerintah-diharapkan-beri-kejelasan-status-psn-remgang/>.

<sup>10</sup> Walhi Riau, "Komisi VI DPR RI Gagal Mengawasi BP Batam Dalam Proyek Rempang Eco City", 24 September 2025, <https://www.walhiriau.or.id/2025/09/24/komisi-vi-dpr-ri-gagal-mengawasi-bp-batam-dalam-proyek-remgang-eco-city/>

<sup>11</sup> Renaldi, Adi, "Rempang Residents Say".

process.<sup>12</sup> The High Court initially ruled in favour of the plaintiffs, but the decision was subsequently overturned by the Court of Appeal in February 1997, thereby allowing the project to proceed.<sup>13</sup> In late 1997, the Malaysian government decided to postpone the project because of economic concerns arising from the Asian financial crisis.<sup>14</sup> However, the construction of the dam resumed just three years later in 2000, with the plan for contentious undersea cables to peninsula Malaysia abandoned.<sup>15</sup> The dam was eventually commissioned in the early 2010s. Taken together, the BHP case reflects Malaysia's reliance on a strong bureaucracy to manage local resistance through procedural concessions such as legal review and technical redesign, while maintaining the project's underlying developmental rationale.

A notably different outcome was observed in the planned Ulu Geruntum hydropower project, located in Perak, which saw the High Court ordering the project to be halted in September 2024.<sup>16</sup> From the time that the project was proposed in 2012 to the court's ruling in 2024, Malaysia underwent a historic political transition, with the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition losing power for the first time since the country's independence in 1957 and Pakatan Harapan opposition coalition taking over the reins of government in 2018. During that period, local communities framed the Ulu Geruntum dispute as politically consequential, warning that they would withdraw support from BN if the hydropower project proceeded.<sup>17</sup> In 2018, indigenous communities from six affected villages filed a lawsuit against the project developers, the Perak state government, the Perak Land and Mines Office, the federal government, and the Orang Asli Development Department (JAKOA).<sup>18</sup> This led to the suspension of the project. This turn of events suggests that heightened political competition may have opened the space for local opposition to gain traction. But the opposition's success proved to be short lived as the project was resumed in 2019.<sup>19</sup> The lawsuit was followed by years of legal processes marked by shifting court decisions,<sup>20</sup> signifying the persistence of a strong developmental logic within the country. Against this backdrop,

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<sup>12</sup> Raman, Meenakshi, "The 1996 Malaysian High Court Decision Concerning the Bakun Hydro-Electric Dam Project", *Asia Pacific Journal of Environmental Law* 2, no. 1 (1997): 93–97.

<sup>13</sup> Raman, Meenakshi, "The 1996 Malaysian High Court Decision".

<sup>14</sup> Bocking, Stephen, "Economics Demolish the Bakun Dam", *Alternatives Journal* 24, no. 2 (1988): 3.

<sup>15</sup> Sovacool, Benjamin K., and L. C. Bulan, "Behind an Ambitious Megaproject in Asia: The History and Implications of the Bakun Hydroelectric Dam in Borneo", *Energy Policy* 39, no. 9 (2011): 4842–4859.

<sup>16</sup> Loh, Ivan, "High Court Rules in Favour of Gopeng Orang Asli Group in Hydro Dam Project Case", *The Star*, 9 September 2024, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2024/09/09/high-court-rules-in-favour-of-gopeng-orang-asli-group-in-hydro-dam-project-case>.

<sup>17</sup> Murty, Michael, "Orang Asli to Switch Support to BN after Perak Hydro Project Suspended", *Free Malaysia Today*, 7 May 2018, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2018/05/07/orang-asli-to-switch-support-to-bn-after-perak-hydro-project-suspended>.

<sup>18</sup> Yeong, Ashley, "Malaysian Court Shuts Down Hydroelectric Dam Project on Indigenous Land", *Mongabay*, 12 September 2024, <https://news.mongabay.com/2024/09/malaysian-court-shuts-down-hydroelectric-dam-project-on-indigenous-land/>.

<sup>19</sup> Looi, Sylvia, "Construction of Controversial Ulu Geruntum Mini Hydro Project to Resume, Says Perak Exco", *Malay Mail*, 2 April 2019, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/04/02/construction-of-controversial-ulu-geruntum-mini-hydro-project-to-resume-say/1739055>.

<sup>20</sup> Yeong, Ashley, "Malaysian Court Shuts Down Hydroelectric Dam Project".

the 2024 victory for the indigenous group represents an exceptional outcome that warrants further investigation.

## Thailand

In Thailand, local opposition has led to some hydropower-related projects being suspended for decades. Proposed since 1979, the water diversion project linked to a string of planned hydropower projects along the Salween River<sup>21</sup> has faced opposition from indigenous communities and NGOs. They have employed collective, strategic and incremental resistance, including efforts to delay and challenge the legitimacy of successive EIAs.<sup>22</sup> The EIA was eventually approved in 2021, prompting complaints by indigenous communities and NGOs over the lack of meaningful and fair participation, and a subsequent fact-finding mission by the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand (NHRCT) to investigate their concerns.<sup>23</sup> In October 2023, representatives from civil society and affected communities filed a lawsuit against the project.<sup>24</sup>

A similar long suspension has been in place in the proposed plan to build the Kaeng Suea Ten Dam on the Mae Yom River. Supported by NGOs, affected villagers organised structured anti-dam committees led by an elected chair, and the project has been suspended for over thirty years.<sup>25</sup> Yet, the state has periodically attempted to revive it. A major protest erupted in 2012 following a government plan to resume the project.<sup>26</sup> Although it was subsequently shelved following the 2014 military coup, the plan resurfaced in 2024, with Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Phumtham Wechayachai suggesting that the dam would reduce the level of flooding from the Yom River.<sup>27</sup> About 1,000 protesters raised their opposition to the plan.<sup>28</sup>

In both cases, it is evident that the state's response takes the form of paternalistic listening, reflected in extended delays and periodic reconsiderations. This approach can arguably be understood as an operationalisation of the moral authority

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<sup>21</sup> Salween Watch, Southeast Asia Rivers Network (SEARIN), and the Center for Social Development Studies, Chulalongkorn University, *The Salween Under Threat: Damming the Longest Free River in Southeast Asia* (Chulalongkorn University, 2024), [https://www.livingriversiam.org/4river-tran/4sw/swd\\_book\\_en.pdf#:~:text=In%201979%2C%20at%20the%20same%20time%20as,serve%20to%20divert%20water%20to%20Thailand.%205](https://www.livingriversiam.org/4river-tran/4sw/swd_book_en.pdf#:~:text=In%201979%2C%20at%20the%20same%20time%20as,serve%20to%20divert%20water%20to%20Thailand.%205).

<sup>22</sup> Fung, Zali, and Vanessa Lamb, "Dams, Diversions, and Development: Slow Resistance and Authoritarian Rule in the Salween River Basin", *Antipode* 55, no. 6 (2023): 1662–1685.

<sup>23</sup> Transborder News, "Voices from Indigenous Communities, NHRC's Investigation Trip on the Yuam/Salween Water Diversion Project", 23 November 2021, <https://transbordernews.in.th/home/?p=29313>

<sup>24</sup> *Bangkok Tribune*, "Chiang Mai Administrative Court Accepts Yuam Water Diversion Case for Deliberation", 30 January 2024, <https://bkktribune.com/chiang-mai-administrative-court-accepts-yuam-water-diversion-case-for-deliberation/>.

<sup>25</sup> Kirchherr, Julian, "Strategies of Successful Anti-Dam Movements: Evidence from Myanmar and Thailand", *Society & Natural Resources* 31, no. 2 (2018): 166–182.

<sup>26</sup> *The Nation*, "1,000 villagers protest against Kaeng Suea Ten Dam project", 28 September 2012, <https://www.nationthailand.com/in-focus/30191319>

<sup>27</sup> *Bangkok Post*, "1,000 Locals Protest Dam Proposal in Thailand's Phrae Province", 8 September 2024, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2861306/1-000-locals-protest-dam-proposal-in-thailands-phrae-province>.

<sup>28</sup> *Bangkok Post*, "1,000 Locals Protest".

vested in state institutions, most notably the monarchy and the technocratic bureaucracy, who are expected to protect the people and deliver development. Resistance thus reflects a perceived shortfall in state performance, prompting the authorities to slow down project implementation and revisit their plans as part of an effort to reconcile protests with state-led development agendas.

## **Lao PDR**

Although freedom of expression is not formally prohibited in Laos,<sup>29</sup> the country's Leninist-style single-party system and political culture strongly discourage opposition from materialising. Resistance relating to hydropower development in Lao PDR is especially difficult given that resources play a central role in the state's national development agenda, which is integral to its legitimacy. Open confrontations are largely unheard of, except probably for one open protest by 40 ethnic Hmong men against Nam Mang 3 hydropower's developer, China International Water and Electric Corporation, some 20 years ago.<sup>30</sup>

Community grievances are more commonly captured in the works of academics and NGOs. For example, a report by World Rainforest Movement records that communities affected by the development of the 290 MW Nam Ngiep 1 hydropower, commissioned in 2019, had little room to contest the project and felt obliged to comply with it despite the state's failure to properly consult them.<sup>31</sup> Expressions of concern typically come from communities living in neighbouring countries instead of communities directly affected in Laos. This is evident in the planned 1,400 MW Luang Prabang dam project, to be commissioned in 2029, which has sparked strong criticism from downstream communities in Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam.<sup>32</sup> The absence of open resistance in Laos therefore does not mean a lack of immediate grievances or long-term social sustainability risks, but rather reflects institutional discipline and ideological narratives of collective development.

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<sup>29</sup> See: Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), *Governance and Participation in Laos* (SIDA, 2023), <https://cdn.sida.se/publications/files/sida2743en-governance-and-participation-in-laos.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> World Rainforest Movement, "Laos: Villagers Mount Unprecedented Protest Against Dam in Laos", 3 May 2003, <https://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin-articles/laos-villagers-mount-unprecedented-protest-against-dam-in-laos#:~:text=The%20little%2Dknown%20incident%2C%20which,the%20China%20Export%2DImport%20Bank.>

<sup>31</sup> World Rainforest Movement, "What Goes Behind the Idea of Biodiversity Offsetting: The Case of Nam Ngiep Dam in Lao PDR", 23 August 2017, <https://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin-articles/what-goes-behind-the-idea-of-biodiversity-offsetting-the-case-of-nam-ngiep-dam-in-lao-pdr#:~:text=Do%20you%20think%20that%20the,them%20right%20at%20their%20homeland.>

<sup>32</sup> Fawthrop, Tom, "In Laos, A 'Very Dangerous Dam' Threatens an Ancient World Heritage Site", *Mongabay*, 10 December 2021, <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/12/in-laos-a-very-dangerous-dam-threatens-an-ancient-world-heritage-site/>

## Implications for Energy Governance and Regional Cooperation

The comparative cases across the four countries illustrate the tension between Southeast Asia's renewable energy ambitions and affected communities. They demonstrate that the central policy challenge lies not in the absence of space for citizen participation, but rather in the exercise of the different types of authority within which contestation is managed. While local resistance rarely halts energy infrastructure projects outright, its interaction with state responses can significantly shape project implementation trajectories.

In Malaysia, state legitimacy that rests on bureaucratic and technocratic competence has inclined the state to respond through procedural channels. This is evidenced in lawsuits by affected communities being followed up by the courts and in limited technical modifications to address specific grievances, thereby enabling the state to manage local resistance while maintaining the broader developmental rationale behind renewable energy projects. In Thailand, by contrast, the moral authority and paternalistic responsibility assumed by state institutions can produce prolonged community engagements, repeated project reconsiderations, and protracted implementation timelines, rather than decisive project cancellation or institutional reform. In Indonesia, projects designated as being in the national interest can shrink the country's decentralisation-enabled negotiation space between communities and local elites and trigger re-centralisation responses that can at times be coercive. In Lao PDR, the norms of compliance and discipline, and a mode of state legitimacy grounded in the use of natural resources for national development, discourage community grievances from materialising, although this does not necessarily mean the absence of such grievances.

These patterns suggest that common standards or best practices on participation, transparency and benefit-sharing may yield different outcomes across countries. This is because they are filtered through distinct state-society relations that are shaped by the way authority is organised and legitimised within each political system. If not managed well, these modes of response can potentially affect the credibility of Southeast Asia's renewable energy commitments. Projects with a history of repression, exclusion or unresolved grievances may carry long-term legitimacy risks, especially in the context of cross-border electricity trade. For energy-importing countries like Singapore, electricity sourced from projects with socio-ecological contestation can generate reputational and political risks, including among their own domestic constituents. Regional energy cooperation is thus only as robust as the legitimacy of the national energy infrastructure projects that underpin it.

This policy report has highlighted the structural nuances under which local resistance over renewable energy infrastructure development are unfolding. Understanding these dynamics is key to designing renewable energy development strategies and regional energy cooperation frameworks that not only facilitate the region's transition to renewable energy sources, but also ensure their environmental, social and political credibility towards the achievement of a genuinely sustainable ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

## About the Authors



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## About the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre)

The NTS Centre conducts research and produces policy-relevant analyses aimed at furthering awareness and building the capacity to address non-traditional security (NTS) issues and challenges in the Asia Pacific region and beyond. The Centre addresses knowledge gaps, facilitates discussions and analyses, engages policymakers, and contributes to building institutional capacity in areas which include: Climate, Peace and Security (CPS), Women, Peace and Security (WPS), Biosecurity, Food Security, Low-Carbon Energy Transition, Nuclear Safety and Security, and Planetary Health. The NTS Centre brings together myriad NTS stakeholders in regular workshops and roundtable discussions, as well as provides a networking platform for NTS research institutions in the Asia Pacific through the NTS-Asia Consortium.

## **About the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies**

The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) is a global graduate school and think tank focusing on strategic studies and security affairs. Its five Research Centres and three Research Programmes, led by the Office of the Executive Deputy Chairman, and assisted by the Dean on the academic side, drive the School's research, education and networking activities.

The graduate school offers Master of Science Programmes in Strategic Studies, International Relations, International Political Economy and Asian Studies. As a school, RSIS fosters a nurturing environment to develop students into first-class scholars and practitioners.

As a think tank, RSIS conducts policy-relevant and forward-looking research in both national and international security, science and technology, society and economic and environmental sustainability. RSIS also produces academic research on security and international affairs. It publishes scholarly research in top-tier academic journals and leading university presses, and distributes policy research in a timely manner to a wide range of readers.