Young Indo-Pacific Conference 2026. What Societies Tell Us: The Indo-Pacific from Within

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Event Report

Panel 1 – Economic Transformation and Social Precarity

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The first panel argued that the Indo-Pacific geopolitical debate often overlooks the region's socio-economic and generational strains. The current transitional period is shaped by factors such as the U.S.-China rivalry, the pivot to Asia, and the crisis of Western capitalism that are producing parallel pressures both in the EU and the Indo-Pacific: youth unemployment, alienation and disaffection with the current social models, exemplified through regional protests in Asia and the rise of the far right in the EU.

AI and its impacts dominated much of the discussion. Panelists described a three-bloc contest divided among three main actors, the U.S., China, and the EU, with the U.S. and China being ahead. China was depicted as a faster, state-directed capital; the U.S. as a broader and more precise deployer; and the EU as a slower AI project hampered by its own bureaucracy. Panelists agreed that most young people will not benefit from this transition, which is more transversal than regional. China was the illustration of this: rapid higher-education expansion produced graduates with weak job prospects, plus an entrenched reliance on civil-service exams normalized a delayed independence, a new reality among young adults.

It was also warned that the Indo-Pacific should not be treated as a single bloc when compared to the EU, arguing that political systems and economic structures were the real differentiators, not mere geography. Democracies and hybrid or authoritarian regimes have different types of protests, and demographics also vary sharply, as mentioned with Japan's case, whose population pyramid is closer to the EU's than India's. It was also discussed that EU youth radicalism targets domestic elites within established democracies, and in most of

the Indo-Pacific, historical ties better explain the disillusionment rather than technological grievance, with Japan as an exception.

Regarding technology and trade, panelists debated whether tariffs and AI are "pulling the ladder" from developing economies. Two views were juxtaposed. On the one hand, AI-driven deflation could disadvantage countries left out of the race, though U.S.-China rivalry is pushing middle powers towards coalitions. On the other hand, great-power competition is being replicated regionally, with India and China as an example, leaving smaller states, especially small Pacific islands, little choice but to align with their regional hegemon. It was also mentioned that technology has historically equalized opportunities and could still do so if AI capabilities stay distributed rather than concentrated among a few companies.

The panel closed on the EU's technology positioning. Panelists agreed that the EU lacks national champions to rival American or Chinese firms and struggles to attract large-scale tech partnerships but retains regulatory soft power, citing GDPR and forced-labour import rules as standard-setting examples. This was labeled as conditional influence because, without access to cutting-edge AI technology, especially as leading AI labs, the EU risks losing its regulatory leverage and seat at the table in global technology governance.

Panel discussion 2 – Political Trust and Democratic Resilience

Marie Kwon, Yuchen Ding, Muhammad A. Utama

The panel started with an introduction highlighting the accountability gap felt in several countries in South-East Asia, notably emerging from the rapid expansion of new infrastructures without sufficient consideration for local environmental and social conditions.

Among the conditions permitting the emergence of this accountability gap were cited:

- A pacing difference, where infrastructure development and technology implementation happens faster than regulation protecting local environmental and social interests
- The framing of infrastructure building as a means to sustain geopolitical competition, rather than a development benefitting the local population. The focus on competitiveness enables the sidelining of local social and environmental considerations. In this instance, the examples of the Jakarta-Bandung railway and nickel extraction projects in Indonesia were cited.

Building on these assessments, the panelists additionally asserted that the lack of accountability went hand in hand with a lack of visibility of impactful projects, and a lack of education regarding social and environmental stakes on a national level. Referring to green colonialism, it was also highlighted that the development projects didn't necessarily benefit the populations affected by their implementation, further damaging political trust.

As a consequence of the raising accountability gap and the lack of consideration for local stakes, it was highlighted that the region, building on its high use of social media, was witnessing online mobilization creating transnational social movements, such as the Gen-Z movement in South Asia and the Milk-Tea Alliance in South-East Asia. The discussion presented online mobilization as a way for citizens to use digital tools to make their voices heard, although digital development had been the source of accountability gaps and human rights violations on several occasions. This use of digital tools for mobilization showcases both adaptation and reappropriation capacities based on local dissent to address democratic deficiencies.

Panel discussion 3 - Identity, Belonging & Social Cohesion

Fatima Zahid Ali, Quynh Iris Nguyen-de Prelle, Shada Islam

The third panel examined how identity and belonging are being reshaped by demographic change, migration, digitalisation and evolving forms of community. The discussion began by emphasising that identity should not be treated as a fixed characteristic, but rather understood as a social and political process shaped by cultural practice, institutional participation and everyday interaction.

Belonging is often associated with a shared identity, which many consider an essential condition for cohesive societies. However, all the panelists agreed that belonging is more closely connected to trust in shared institutions, rights and civic participation, and that diversity does not automatically weaken social cohesion. What matters is how diversity is experienced: whether different groups have access to recognition, whether they can participate in public life, and whether their histories and identities are treated as legitimate components of society.

The panel then addressed the main obstacles and forms of discrimination faced by migrants from Asia in European countries, drawing on the panellists' personal experiences. The discussion also reflected on the expectations associated with the 'model minority' stereotype and how it pits minority groups against one another.

The speakers also considered the changing role of digital communities. Online platforms allow individuals to find solidarity beyond geographical boundaries and can be particularly important for minorities, migrants and young people experiencing social isolation. At the same time, it was discussed how digital spaces can reproduce social fragmentation, intensify polarisation and create closed identity-based networks and social bubbles.

The discussion concluded by suggesting that civic nationalism may, in some respect, provide continuity and recognition. However, it is increasingly being used by far-right parties as an exclusionary tool, defined through ethnicity, ancestry or cultural conformity, and deployed to create a scapegoat for internal social and economic problems. These tendencies are evident in the Europe context, but the panellist also referred to their potential trickle-down effects citing examples such as Hindutva in India and the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar.