The Asia-Pacific region is in the midst of change. The emergence of new and great powers, growing democratisation, new forms of multilateral engagement and new approaches to state building and intervention are some of the major trends shaping this region. This special issue examines four countries in the Asia-Pacific region that help illustrate these trends: Solomon Islands, Myanmar, Indonesia and China. Each is currently undergoing its own major set of transitions. Solomon Islands is emerging from a decade-long Australian-led intervention into a new phase of state formation. In Myanmar, after almost five decades of military rule, a semicivilian government is implementing a series of major reforms designed to transition the country towards more democratic and effective government. In Indonesia, the newly elected administration of President Joko Widodo seeks to harness the country’s growing economic weight to transform Indonesia into a ‘big country’ (negara besar) with international respect and global influence. Finally, in China, the consolidation of power by President Xi Jinping is being used for broader impact at regional and global levels. In this special issue, we consider these transitions in the context of global shifts in power and influence. Each country confronts the need to reconcile its past with the future challenges of its local conditions.

To explore the intersections between these local, regional and global dynamics, we have harnessed the diverse expertise of researchers in the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at The Australian National University (ANU). We have sought to bring together a group of researchers whose expertise ranges from those with deep country-specific and subnational understanding, to those with a wider regional-level and global focus. The special issue is structured in four sections. Each of these sections concentrates on one of these four Asia-Pacific countries, exploring its security challenges, responses and contexts in three connected articles. In each section, the first of those articles deals with local security challenges and dynamics, and the varied responses of state and society. The second of the articles considers subregional and regional dynamics: how the focus of country’s responses to its security challenges affects its neighbours; and how those neighbours respond. Then the third article in each section considers these regional dynamics and how they are tied to broader international dilemmas, processes and norms.

The first section concentrates on Solomon Islands in the context of the conclusion of the decade-long Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). In the first article, Matthew Allen and Sinclair Dinnen ponder the legacy of RAMSI for the stability and prosperity of Solomon Islands politics and society. They observe that RAMSI was highly successful in restoring security—its primary mission—but it has been much less successful...

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in advancing its ultimate goal, which is state building. This, they argue, is because RAMSI pursued a narrowly technocratic state-building agenda, conceiving the state as a limited bundle of functions, an approach that failed to affect the underlying political economy of Solomon Islands. What is needed is a deeper, more organic process of ‘state formation’. Allen and Dinnen argue that post-RAMSI, Solomon Islands will continue to depend on external assistance to provide space where new hybrid forms of state formation can take place.

In the second article, George Carter and Stewart Firth examine the changed regional dynamics in Melanesia during the RAMSI decade. They point to much greater engagement of the states of Melanesia with external powers, the new confidence and assertiveness of Fiji and Papua New Guinea, and the new forms of regionalism and subregionalism that emerged. They point to a future of much greater complexity in Melanesia, as rising Asian powers, new regionalisms, assertiveness and no small amounts of internal rivalries define the region. In the third essay, Joanne Wallis and Michael Wesley examine Solomon Islands’ and Melanesia’s effect on global dynamics through the prism of the region’s resident superpower: Australia. It is Australia, they argue, that has always viewed the region through its global alliance responsibilities of ensuring stability and excluding hostile interests. As RAMSI quietly winds down, the stabilisation imperative is being trumped by the exclusion imperative, as rising Asian powers’ interest in the South Pacific begins to worry Canberra’s great power ally. The challenge for Australia will be to reconcile its alliance imperatives with a chance to seize new opportunities in the Pacific to engage with rising powers in a collaborative way.

The second section examines conditions in Myanmar, which is seeking to reset its national politics and international relations in the wake of almost five decades of military rule. Since 2011 Myanmar has embarked on a remarkable, and yet incomplete, reform of its social and economic institutions. As Nicholas Farrelly and Chit Win explain in their article, this has required a new set of political understandings in Naypyitaw. They suggest that the creation of a new political culture has required genuine compromises from across the political spectrum. The complexities and ambiguities of the transition need to be given our full attention, especially during the uncertain period that will follow the 2015 election. Yet, as Nick Cheesman, Tyrell Haberkorn and Bina D’Costa show, the country’s new compromises are inadequate responses to what remain deeply flawed legal protections. They argue that across Myanmar, Thailand and Bangladesh there has been inadequate attention to the practices that serve, in the long-term, to support greater justice and more equitable treatment under the law. Even as Myanmar society becomes more tolerant of political differences there are persistent threats to those who are deemed subversive. The long-term improvement of this situation will require wise leadership, but there is no guarantee, following the Thai and Bangladeshi examples, that this will emerge. Trevor Wilson, former Australian Ambassador to Myanmar, writes the final article in this section. He argues that Myanmar faces major decisions about its geopolitical entanglements and will need to prepare carefully for the challenges of its location. Long borders with China, India and Thailand suggest that it will need to be ready for a range of contingencies. The United States has now re-engaged with Myanmar and this also changes the overall geopolitical calculus.

Our third section focuses on Indonesia, a country that appears to be on the cusp of becoming a great power, but which continues to lag in diplomatic and strategic capacity. Edward Aspinall charts the new nationalism that has become pronounced in Indonesia since the 2014 presidential election. Aspinall suggests that this nationalism reveals not only Indonesia’s great power ambitions, but also deep insecurities about Indonesia’s ability to achieve that great power status. Mathew Davies and Susan Harris Rimmer continue to explore this binary, acknowledging that Indonesia is simultaneously perceived to be both the most important country in Southeast Asia and a state that punches ‘below its weight’ on the international stage. Yet the authors argue
that the power of Indonesia’s normative influence is often overlooked. This normative influence is sustained by Indonesia’s adherence to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Way principles of consensus and nonintervention, thereby ensuring that Indonesia’s dominant position within Southeast Asia does not produce anxiety in other regional capitals. Nevertheless, as a country with clear great power ambitions, Indonesia faces a tension: becoming a great power untethered from the ASEAN Way, counter-intuitively, makes Indonesia a less influential power.

Rounding off this section, Greg Fealy and Hugh White examine Indonesia’s potential to become and to be recognised as a global great power. They suggest that despite great economic potential and the ambitious goals of President Joko Widodo—goals that have not been articulated since the Sukarno era—Indonesia’s great power ambitions will be tempered by the country’s weak diplomatic and military capacity and an uncertain regional order.

The fourth and final section of the special issue deals with China, a country that is already, unquestionably, a great power, but one that is also caught between its desire for greater global influence on the one hand, and its need to overcome pressing domestic and regional constraints on the other. In this section, Linda Jakobson and Ryan Manuel begin by investigating the thorny question of how foreign policy decisions are made in China, and the way in which Xi has centralised decision-making processes. Jakobson and Manuel suggest that despite Xi’s efforts to better coordinate decision-making, there are limits to any individual leader’s ability to solve the problems of fragmentation, competing interest groups and inefficient information flows that plague China’s Party-State system. These domestic problems are further compounded by challenges at the regional level. Here Amy King and Brendan Taylor argue that Xi Jinping’s China now faces a particularly complicated regional security environment owing to the remembered history of the Second World War. The authors focus on how history is being used instrumentally by elites in China, Japan and South Korea to shape and contest Asia’s changing regional order. Since the end of the Cold War, China has used the history of Japanese imperialism and aggression to underpin its Patriotic Education Campaign. The challenge facing Xi Jinping is that Japan’s Abe government is now retaliating: using history as an emotive weapon to contest China’s challenge to the US-led order in Asia. In spite, or perhaps because, of the challenges that China faces at the regional level, Xi Jinping is looking beyond Northeast Asia and has embarked on an impressive array of foreign policy initiatives designed to enhance China’s influence at the global level. Zhang Feng explores how partnership diplomacy, Silk Road economic diplomacy and financial diplomacy have been unrolled with great speed over the past 3 years. Although it is far too soon to tell whether China has attained the global influence it desires, China’s goal is clear: winning friends and influence around the globe.

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