Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism Is Turning the Internet Against Democracy
By Robert W. McChesney
The New Press, 2013, 320 pages, $27.95 (hardcover)

In the early 1990s, many of us believed the Internet would be a force for democracy and good worldwide, ending monopolies of information and centralized control over communication. Some of us still believe so. But Robert McChesney, communications professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and an early Internet celebrant-turned-skeptic, feels otherwise and argues that the Internet has evolved to sit squarely within the political economy of capitalism. He argues forcefully that it has been commercialized and privatized by “market forces” since the mid-1990s, in particular the cartels of service providers such as AT&T and Verizon in the US, and the digital “natural monopolies” such as Google, Microsoft, Apple, Amazon and Facebook. These Internet giants “conquered” the Internet with the help of a supportive and enabling state, utilizing copyrights, patents, intellectual property rights, etc. The author depicts an Internet dystopia but is neither pessimist nor critic. Instead, he argues that the solution lies in people’s political movements and participation. He also calls on the news media to expose what he calls the duplicity and crimes of those in power. Although he concentrates almost exclusively on the Internet in the US, the issues he raises are global, indeed, as the problems lie not in the Internet per se, but in the fact that it has been conquered by global capitalism.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

Exposing a Web of Capitalist Greed

North Korea has been in transition for two decades now since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the death of its founding father Kim Il Sung in 1994. Ever since, academic and policy debates on North Korea have heavily centered on the probability of its collapse, whether from implosion or explosion, and its belligerent and provocative external behavior. Ironically, these pointed debates have left a vacuum in the focus of North Korean studies, in particular its transformation from within. This book, a collection of works by 16 experts, seeks to fill that vacuum. North Korea’s transition, as described in this volume, has two facets: one is the hereditary leadership succession to Kim Jong Un, and the other is the far broader changes in society and the economy. As for the political transition still underway since Kim Jong Il’s death in 2011, the authors appear to have a consensus on the regime’s stability, if not yet the extent of Kim Jong Un’s consolidation of power. As to the broader transitions taking place, there also appears to be a consensus. North Korea today is no longer the country it was under Kim Il Sung, due in great part to the spontaneous marketization of the economy from below. There has emerged a crack between its high-level politics and its socioeconomic arena. Readers may not find in this volume a direct answer to the question of where this crack might lead North Korea, but they will find rich food for thought on the dynamics between political stability and socioeconomic changes in the country.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim, Director of the Public Diplomacy Department at the Korea Foundation and a book review editor for Global Asia.

What Do North Koreans Think?

North Korea in Transition: Politics, Economy, and Society
Edited by Kyung-Ae Park and Scott Snyder
Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012, 328 pages, $35.00 (paperback)

North Korea has been in transition for two decades now since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the death of its founding father Kim Il Sung in 1994. Ever since, academic and policy debates on North Korea have heavily centered on the probability of its collapse, whether from implosion or explosion, and its belligerent and provocative external behavior. Ironically, these pointed debates have left a vacuum in the focus of North Korean studies, in particular its transformation from within. This book, a collection of works by 16 experts, seeks to fill that vacuum. North Korea’s transition, as described in this volume, has two facets: one is the hereditary leadership succession to Kim Jong Un, and the other is the far broader changes in society and the economy. As for the political transition still underway since Kim Jong Il’s death in 2011, the authors appear to have a consensus on the regime’s stability, if not yet the extent of Kim Jong Un’s consolidation of power. As to the broader transitions taking place, there also appears to be a consensus. North Korea today is no longer the country it was under Kim Il Sung, due in great part to the spontaneous marketization of the economy from below. There has emerged a crack between its high-level politics and its socioeconomic arena. Readers may not find in this volume a direct answer to the question of where this crack might lead North Korea, but they will find rich food for thought on the dynamics between political stability and socioeconomic changes in the country.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim, Director of the Public Diplomacy Department at the Korea Foundation and a book review editor for Global Asia.
Emerging India’s Economics Lessons

Why Growth Matters: How Economic Growth In India Reduced Poverty and the Lessons for Other Developing Countries

By Jagdish Bhagwati and Arvind Panagariya

Public Affairs, 2013, 304 pages, $28.99 (hardcover)

What are the secrets behind India’s economic growth and poverty reduction for the past two decades? How does the Indian growth model compare to the Chinese, East Asian and Soviet models? The answer offered in this book is simple and straightforward—the only panacea is “inclusive growth.”

Jagdish Bhagwati and Arvind Panagariya, economics professors at Columbia University, present a convincing, orthodox growth model of India, which contains three essential requisites: high savings-turned-investment, high productivity of investment and integration with the world economy. High productivity and outward orientation in trade and investment are elements that set apart the Indian, East Asian and Chinese models from that of the Soviet Union, which failed in increasing productivity due to a lack of incentives in the centrally planned economy. Growth propelled by market reforms (“Track I reforms”) is a necessary, but not sufficient condition to reduce poverty. The authors argue that wider institutionalized social reforms (“Track II reforms”) such as health care and education that additionally help the poor, are essential to the “inclusive growth” model. In this regard, they strongly argue for connection between the politics of democracy and the economics of poverty reduction. Liberal democracy in India and South Korea has provided the political mechanism to channel state revenues to Track II reforms. Thus, they argue, China cannot be a role model for other developing countries, as Track II reforms there have lagged behind Track I reforms precisely because of a lack of democracy.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

Can China Change Everything ... Again?

China 2030: Building a Modern, Harmonious, and Creative Society

By the World Bank and Development Research Center of the State Council, People’s Republic of China

World Bank, 2013, 480 pages, $39.95 (Paperback)

China’s goal is to create “a modern, harmonious, creative, and high-income society” by 2030, and this report, the first written by China’s State Council Development Research Center and the World Bank, lists six priority areas for reform that China must adopt to make a strategic policy shift as fundamental as its market reforms and opening up three decades ago. They are: market foundations; innovation; green development; equality of opportunity and social protection for all; public finances; and mutually beneficial relations between China and the rest of the world.

China is now at another critical juncture in which it has to change its development model. China is now at another critical juncture in which it has to change its development model to avoid what economists call the “middle-income trap” in order to achieve its vision. But devising a new growth model raises two central questions. One is political: How can China handle possible resistance to reforms from firms, groups and individuals who enjoy privileges and benefits from the current structure, as well as from the short-term losers of reform? Another is more fundamental. As the state moves toward a policy and regulatory environment supportive of free and fair competition, it must uphold and safeguard the rule of law. Might this lead to the eventual political, as well as economic, convergence of the “Beijing Consensus” and the “Washington Consensus”?

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim
US Naval War College professor S. C. M. Paine has masterfully rewritten the history of World War II as part of The Wars for Asia, 1911–1949. Toggling between Tokyo, Beijing and Moscow, he unravels the tangled skein linking the Chinese civil war, Japan’s regional war to control China and the Soviet Union’s (and later America’s) global war against fascism.

He shows how Japan’s “operational success” on the battlefields of East Asia, combined with its drive to dominate China, led it to the suicidal strategy of going to war with the US and the UK to cut off their aid to the Chinese. Joseph Stalin, meanwhile, comes across as a Machiavellian genius who gets the Japanese, Chinese and Americans to fight and weaken one another. And he deftly explains Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek’s dilemma: to survive, he had to fight what he knew was a losing war against Japan. Drawing on English, Chinese, Japanese and Russian sources, Paine rises close to an Archimedian point aspired to by all historians, clinically assessing the unfolding of decades of war without taking sides. Given the current “history wars” roiling Northeast Asia, and the fact that the fathers and grandfathers of today’s leaders fought one another in the 1930s and 1940s, this is a timely reminder of the need to study the historical facts. One only wishes Paine had started his story a bit earlier, with the Sino-Japanese War in Korea in 1894–95, and continued to include the Korean War, so as to cover the full breadth of Northeast Asia’s long era of war.

Reviewed by John Delury, Assistant Professor at Yonsei University’s Graduate School of International Studies and a book review editor for Global Asia.

In China Dreams, William Callahan listens in on the conversation in the sprawling public space that exists between Communist Party leaders like Xi Jinping, on the one hand, and incarcerated dissidents such as Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo, on the other. The black and white of state propaganda versus human rights criticism yields to a colorful debate among Chinese over where their country and society is heading.

Callahan is interested in the open-ended conversation unfolding among those he calls “citizen intellectuals,” from academics and strategists to iconoclastic but popular artists and writers. Those trying to understand China’s indigenous ideas about its future as a center, if not the center, of the international system will enjoy the succinct introduction to Colonel Liu Mingfu’s bestselling book, The China Dream, predicting that China will surpass the US as a military superpower, or philosopher Zhao Tingyang’s ideas about a “benevolent” form of Chinese imperialism.

The ‘China dream’, Callahan finds, is in reality a complex ‘debate about values.’

Reviewed by John Delury.
An Intimate Look at India’s New Face

India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India
By Akash Kapur

Akash Kapur left India in 1991, a few years before it began its extraordinary transformation from a semi-socialist agricultural economy into a rabidly capitalist, hi-tech and service-sector powerhouse. India Becoming is Kapur’s elegiac, hopeful, agonized and deeply personal attempt to make sense of the changes he found on returning in 2003 and starting a family in his native village on the Bay of Bengal.

In gorgeous prose, Kapur assembles a cast of middle-aged farmers watching traditional society vanish before their eyes, young movers and shakers in the booming cities struggling to enjoy the “easy modernity” of entrepreneurship and freedom, and desperately poor men and women — some literally outcasts — trying to survive in the polluted, impoverished shadows of rapid development.

The parallels to China, with its even longer and equally dramatic period of “creative destruction” are striking, but the absence of its Asian neighbors in this portrait of India’s modern life is noticeable. There is the “Americanization of the economy,” and some ghosts of British imperialism, but little of other Asians in India or Indians venturing out across Asia. Perhaps it reflects the author’s Anglo-American orientation, having studied at Harvard, been a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, and a writer in New York. But there may be more to it, something about India’s lingering detachment from Asia, boxed in as it is by hostility with Pakistan and still-frosty relations with China. Or perhaps India’s return to Asia is the next chapter of its “becoming.” One hopes Kapur will be there to tell that next story with the same subtlety and sympathy.

Reviewed by John Delury.

The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat
By Vali Nasr
New York: Doubleday, 2013, 320 pages, $28.95 (Hardcover)

This book, an indictment of President Barack Obama’s Middle East policy by former US State Department advisor Vali Nasr, caused a storm in the teacup of Washington foreign policy debates. He takes the White House to task for deciding the fate of nations — Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran — based on “tactical domestic political considerations.” Obama squandered the historic opportunity of the Arab Spring and pushed Iran further down a nuclear path by relying on sanctions to avoid looking soft at home.

The story’s tragic hero is former mentor Richard Holbrooke, who tried in vain to marshal the full resources of US economic and political engagement in South Asia and the Middle East, only to be undercut by rivals.

By disengaging from the Middle East, Obama is forfeiting the region to China.

While the biting criticism of Obama’s foreign policy has attracted the most attention, Nasr, now Dean of Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, wants to make a much larger point: that by disengaging from the Middle East, Obama is forfeiting the region to China. Government-backed Chinese businesses are racing in to fill the void left by US troop withdrawals. Nasr has a very dark view of China’s aims, and employs a Manichean view of the Middle East’s future being decided as a contest between the “illiberal and mercantilist” China versus a democratic and internationalist US, in his argument for revived US engagement in the region.

Reviewed by John Delury.

US vs. China in The Middle East

Reviewed by John Delury.