THE EAST ASIA CENTER PRESENTS
A TALK BY

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CHINA’S FUTURE IN A MULTI-NODAL WORLD

Over the next twenty years China is likely to become the largest national economy, though not the richest one-fifth of the world’s population. Chinese demographic power will be qualitatively different from American technological power despite bottom-line similarities in GNP. The disparity between China’s aggregate and per capita capacities is likely to anchor a world order in which concerns about conflicts of interests drive interactions, but no state or group of states believes that it is capable of benefitting from unilaterally enforcing its will against the rest. Thus there is no set of “poles” whose competition or cooperation determines the world order, despite the differences of exposure created by disparities in capacity. Rather, the order would be best described as “multi-nodal,” a matrix of interacting, unequal units that pursue their own interests within a stable array of national identities and an increasing routinization of international regimes and interpenetrating transnational connections. China’s diplomatic traditions in Asia are well suited to adapting to multi-nodalism as a global posture. While the most prominent relationship will be between the US and China, the diplomacy of each toward the rest of the world is likely to decide success or difficulty.

Brantly Womack is C.K. Yen Chair at the Miller Center and Professor of Foreign Affairs at University of Virginia. He is an honoree of three Chinese universities, and in 2011 received the National China Friendship Award from Vice Premier Zhang Dejiang. He is the author most recently of China Among Unequals: Asymmetric International Relationships in Asia (2010), and of China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry (2006). He edited China’s Rise in Historical Perspective (2010), and has written more than a hundred articles and chapters on Asian politics.

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