

This opinion piece “Don’t overestimate China’s rise” by PCI Board Member Dr. Chung-in Moon appeared in the JoongAng Daily on June 21, 2011.

[Viewpoint] Don’t overestimate China’s rise
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I attended the June 12–13 World Economic Forum on East Asia in Jakarta, Indonesia. China was the central focus of the meeting amid growing antagonism and a joint stand among Southeast Asian nations against China over territorial claims in the South China Sea. China said it wants to settle the dispute through dialogue, but few among Southeast Asian states were reassured.

But is the hard-headed standoff the only approach? In his recent book “On China,” former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger compares the intransigent rivalry between the British and Germans in pre-World War I Europe to the present tension between the United States and China.

In his concluding chapter arguing for a “balance of power” and the use of meaningful diplomacy to work out sticky foreign and economic affairs with China, Kissinger cited the “Crowe Memorandum,” authored by Eyre Crowe, a senior British foreign officer, for presentation to British Foreign Secretary Earl Grey in 1907.

The memorandum suggested that the British Empire take a hard-line approach to the recently unified German state, a policy that would eventually influence the break out of World War I seven and a half years later. “England must expect that Germany will surely seek to diminish the power of any rivals, to enhance her own by extending her dominion, to hinder the

cooperation of other states, and ultimately to break up and supplant the British Empire,” Crowe argued. The conciliatory moves from moderate German statesmen, he argued, were gestures to mask ambitions for expansion and advised against any attempt to seek alliance or mutual trust between the two powers.

Kissinger expressed concern that the same power game and choices are laid out between two major protagonists in the Pacific. Hawkish policy makers in Washington are arguing that “China is surely seeking to extend its dominion and ultimately supplant the United States” in calling for actions to suppress China’s increasing global clout. He warns the U.S. against repeating the apparent European fallacy of a century ago as its relations with China cannot be a zero-sum game, and advised the two major powers to instead seek a richer “co-evolving” pattern of alliances.

His argument, based on his ample experience in dealing with China, also makes us rethink our own response to China’s assertiveness. To pose as a formidable challenge to the U.S., China must be equally competent in capabilities, motives and political will. But China today falls short of meeting these qualifications.

In capabilities, China cannot be genuinely regarded as a rich country even if it becomes the world’s largest economy in terms of gross domestic product by 2017, as the IMF predicts. Even as the world’s largest exporter and holder of foreign exchange reserves, the economy supports an enormous population of 1.3 billion people, of which a majority remain poor.

In military power, it is hardly comparable to the United States. The United States has military alliances with more than 60 countries compared with China’s one alliance with Pakistan. China cannot think of mobilizing military power on a global scale.

China should not be seen as a real threat in intentions as well. Its foreign stance is still a “peaceful” rise, as the leadership is primarily engrossed in domestic affairs of improving the wide wealth gap among the income

classes and regions, dealing with corruption, and addressing resource and environmental problems. It must maintain peace with the outside world to pursue harmony within. The egocentric and hard-line view remains a muffled voice in governance.

Will we see the Chinese leader pursuing aggressive expansion in the near future? The bureaucratic leaders after Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping won't likely pursue a risky gamble on the global stage. They are too preoccupied with more urgent complexities at home – such as the growing democratic movement, a restive ethnic minority and other social unrest. China cannot afford to invest power and resources for external aspirations with such preoccupations at home.

If the international society overestimates the minority's view and mounts an excess defensive against China, it may only end up provoking Chinese military aspirations and nationalism.

Inflated defense and debate over China's rise can only accelerate its presence as an imminent threat. We must learn from the wise wisdom of a veteran diplomat who experienced it all.

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By Moon Chung-in

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