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World Economic Forum

China: A Gentle Giant?

Hannah Clark, 01.25.07, 1:15 PM ET

DAVOS, SWITZERLAND -China is a placid country that will use its superpower status only for good. Oh, and it's not a superpower. At least, that was the remarkably benign view that emerged from a session at Davos Wednesday titled, "What kind of world does China want?"

First up: Cheng Siwei, vice chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. When he spoke to the assembled dignitaries, Cheng sounded like a lonely boy on the playground. "We want to make friends with all countries. It's never too late to be our friends," he said. Later, he added: "We are not and we will never be a superpower in the future."

Of course, we would expect such a placid view from a Chinese governmental official. But listen to William McDonough, who served as chairman of the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board and president of the Federal Reserve Bank before taking a job at Merrill Lynch: "The Chinese want a world in which the Chinese people can prosper." True enough. But will there come a time when China's continued prosperity comes at a cost to someone else?

And what about Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the public policy school at National University of Singapore, and author of *Can Asians Think?* Like most of the panelists, Mahbubani sees a China that isn't pressing its will upon the rest of the world. "They don't have to go out and exert their power," Mahbubani said. "They can already see people coming to them."

That's probably true. Still, it seems odd that everything they said was so mild, even by the not-so-spicy standards of diplomatic talk. Aren't any of them worried that someday, somehow, China might exert a little unwanted political pressure or abuse its economic power.

The most provocative insight came from Pei Minxin, director of the China Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "Chinese leaders are increasingly open to foreign ideas," Pei said. "They consult foreign friends more than they consult their own people." That's good for the rest of the world, of course. But what about China itself? Says Pei: "It is likely that in the future, major Chinese foreign policy initiatives may not be supported by the Chinese people."