

Crisis Investing: Keeping Your Head

When a crisis creates uncertainty, markets often become volatile, especially when the scope of the disaster isn't clear. A crisis is like Janus, the Roman god with faces that looked forward and back. For some investors, it may represent a threat; for others, it may spell opportunity. Not every crisis requires a reaction; sticking to a long-term plan is still the best strategy for most people.

Here are some examples of factors that investors sometimes overlook when considering which face of Janus to focus on during a crisis.

Watch the global supply chain

Companies and economies increasingly operate in a global context. The more heavily an industry or company relies on global partners, the more it might be affected by crisis conditions. Think not only about companies that are affected directly by turmoil, but about other companies that rely on them.

For example, China has become in many ways the world's factory floor, and many information technology services are now outsourced to India. How would a crisis in either country affect global supply chains or communications infrastructure? Might competitors not affected by the crisis pick up at least some of the slack? How might a particular industry be hit by shortages of parts or raw materials? Is a large multinational so geographically spread out that a crisis in one part of the world may have little impact on its overall operations? Oil is perhaps the most obvious example of how a crisis can affect global supply chains. A perceived threat to supplies can affect prices of other assets.

Consider currency fluctuations

Currency fluctuations are another factor to consider. Crises in one part of the world can affect that region's currency. That in turn can affect companies located elsewhere. The 2010 panic over potential default by several eurozone countries strengthened the dollar, and though that may sound like good news, a stronger dollar can hurt U.S. exports.

Currency issues are also important because of what's called the "carry trade." This happens when investors use money from a country where interest rates are relatively low--the Japanese yen and the U.S. dollar have been prime examples in recent years--to invest elsewhere at a better rate of return. However, if the cheaper currency suddenly increases in value, the carry trade can reverse as investors put their capital back into the so-called funding currency. That can affect assets denominated in other currencies. For example, the yen soared as investors anticipated that money would be repatriated to deal with Japan's earthquake/tsunami/nuclear disaster. Some investments denominated in other currencies suffered when investors sold them to invest in yen.

Think both long term and short term

Nothing lasts forever. A crisis could create opportunities that eventually peter out, or challenges that later seem trivial. Or it could have little short-term impact but mean profound change over a period of years. When considering whether a crisis represents a challenge or an opportunity, think both short term and long term.

A crisis with potentially long-term opportunities or harmful consequences may mean you may be able to take more time with a decision. If the window of opportunity is smaller or the potential devastation more short term, remember that there are alternatives to an all-or-nothing approach. For example, you could take a small position and see how your investment thesis plays out before committing more. Even if the window of opportunity slams shut, new opportunities often emerge during even the worst of times; missing one now doesn't mean you won't find others later. If you're worried about a potential downturn, you could use other investments to hedge your exposure while retaining a long-term stake, or take profits to protect part of your holdings but leave some money invested in case the crisis is short-lived.

***Note:** Any investment approach involves some type of risk, including the possible loss of principal, and there's no guarantee any strategy or technique will be successful.*

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