

hindustantimes**Kishore Mahbubani**
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Not higher, faster, stronger

The Chinese have a brilliant translation of the word 'crisis'. It combines two Chinese characters: danger and opportunity. Each crisis inevitably contains dangers but it often provides opportunities. So too does the current Olympics crisis. It provides India an opportunity to send some powerful long-term signals to China.

To understand how such signals will be received, it is important to understand the current mindset of the Chinese leaders. They are probably genuinely bewildered. China has marshalled enormous economic resources to ensure the success of the Beijing Olympics. The Chinese used the tools of modern architecture and technology to create and build the best-ever Olympic village. They also dug deep into Chinese tradition to pick an auspicious date to launch the Olympics. The number '8' is considered lucky for the Chinese. To launch the Olympics on '8/8/08' is, therefore, considered the luckiest possible date.

Clearly, however, Chinese luck has run out even before the Olympics have begun. The widely broadcast scenes of demonstrators trying to snuff out the Olympic torch have created the impression of a global crisis around the Games. The head of the International Olympic Committee, Jacques Rogge, said so openly: "It is a crisis, there is no doubt about that."

The Chinese leaders are probably bewildered by the crisis because so far they have done a brilliant job of managing China's international and geopolitical relationships by using well the traditional levers of political and economic ties and even financial aid to create sound long-term mutual interdependence between China and all its partners. Indeed, the largest financial aid programme of China is to the United States. By continuing to buy US Treasury Bills at low interest rates, despite the depreciating value of the US dollar, China is essentially subsidising the American economy. In return, China gets access to American markets and a stable geopolitical relationship between the world's greatest emerging power and the world's greatest power. All this has been part of a brilliant geopolitical strategy by China.

The Olympics crisis will gradually make the Chinese leadership aware that there is a fourth dimension to international relations that China has hitherto paid little attention to. This fourth dimension exists in the ethereal space of the international public opinion generated by international media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In theory, the media and NGOs have little real power. In practice, they do because they shape international opinion. The actual number of demonstrators against the Chinese Olympics may have been a minuscule number in global terms. But their global impact has been phenomenal. This multiplier effect has been generated by the fourth dimension.

The Chinese lack of understanding of this fourth dimension is also shown in the way they organise their Boao forum, the Chinese competitor of the Davos forum. Using the enormous bilateral clout of the Chinese government, many senior government and business leaders attend each Boao forum. But it lacks the sparks of Davos because it fails to invite the independent intelligentsia, the media and the cultural figures like novelists and playwrights who drive the fourth dimension of international life.

By contrast, the Western governments understand well how this fourth dimension works. Western leaders know precisely how to posture when the TV camera lights come on. They compete with each other to show how attuned they are to 'international' opinion. Hence, Nicolas Sarkozy, Angela Merkel and Gordon Brown have been competing with each other to show how politically correct they are on the issue of the Olympics. When asked whether he supported a boycott, Sarkozy said he "could not close the door to any possibility... our Chinese friends must understand the worldwide concern that there is about the question of Tibet". Germany announced in late March that Merkel will not attend the opening ceremony. Brown has indicated that he will not boycott the Olympics but remains cryptic on whether he would be attending the inauguration.

Somewhat unusually, George W Bush has been reacting with a remarkably statesmanlike approach to the Olympic crisis. He continues to insist that he will attend the Olympics opening ceremony. His liberal critics in America, including the Democrat presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, are likely to attack him. But by standing firm, Bush has significantly enhanced the value of his participation to the Chinese government. In so doing, he has also significantly increased his bargaining leverage. Beijing will, therefore, be under great pressure to exercise every restraint to ensure that no excuse is given for Bush to cancel his participation. In some respects, it could be argued that this was a brilliant move by the American President.

The Indian government could be equally brilliant. By declaring early that New Delhi will not boycott the opening ceremony, India will also significantly gain political leverage in Beijing. Equally importantly, it will gain India more political space to work towards a settlement of the Tibetan issue. In theory, it should be possible to do so. The Dalai Lama is advocating autonomy, not independence. The Chinese government also believes in autonomy. The official Chinese government policy paper on Tibet says that it "regards exercise of regional ethnic autonomy in areas where ethnic communities live in compact communities as a basic policy for solving the ethnic issue".

Despite this agreement in theory, no movement has been possible in generating a dialogue between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government. There has been a complete breakdown of trust. To make matters worse, the violent protests in Tibet and elsewhere have re-ignited a very powerful Chinese nationalism that has further constrained the political options for Beijing. In the Chinese blogosphere, a political explosion has occurred that the Chinese government cannot ignore. This may explain why the Dalai Lama has strongly argued against violence. In the long run, the people most damaged by this violence will be the Tibetans.

Many Western demonstrators believe that they would achieve a huge success by securing either a boycott or a perceived failure of the Beijing Olympics. Little are they aware of the huge damage they would do if they succeed. So far, despite the continuation of the Communist Party government, China has committed itself to integrate with the open and liberal global economy and in the process become a common 'responsible stakeholder' of the global system. Consider the impact on the world if the Chinese government, in response to a nationalistic backlash of a failed Beijing Olympics, decides to turn its back on the world. A China that becomes more closed to the world will provide even less political space to its ethnic minorities, including the Tibetan people. Hence, paradoxically, those who really care for the Tibetan people should hope for a successful Olympics, which will in turn continue the process of opening up China to the rest of the world. At this plastic moment, India can do a lot to ensure that a wiser long-term strategy is adopted.

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