

20 February 2021

Cancellation of the Tokyo Olympics and Japan's Diplomacy

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The Olympic Games are to be designed to contribute to the creation of a peaceful and better world by educating young people through sport based on the Olympic spirit of mutual understanding, friendship, solidarity and fair play, without discrimination of any kind.

At a United Nations Security Council meeting on February 17, Secretary-General António Guterres pointed out that the coronavirus continues its merciless march across the world — upending lives, destroying economies and undermining the Sustainable Development Goals. He then called for the equitable distribution of vaccines against the coronavirus, noting that progress on vaccinations has been wildly uneven and unfair, with just 10 countries having administered 75 per cent of all vaccines, and that more than 130 countries have not received a single dose

I believe that Japan should present the following ideas to the world.

First, Japan should make it its top diplomatic priority to take the lead in building a momentum of international solidarity to redress the inequalities between nations identified by UN Secretary-General Guterres.

Second, Japan should take the lead in overcoming these challenges and will then become the host country of the Olympic Games as a testament to the positive results of its global efforts.

Third, in line with this basic policy, Japan will cancel the hosting of the Olympic Games in Tokyo this summer.

Fourth, the circumstances surrounding the world have changed dramatically since last year when Japan decided to postpone the Tokyo Olympics until this summer, with the discovery of highly infectious new coronavirus variants in the UK, South Africa and Brazil, which have been spreading to other countries and posing a new threat to the world. The decision to cancel the Olympic Games in Tokyo this summer is in accordance to the legal principle of *clausula rebus sic stantibus* which stipulates that agreements become non-binding if there is a major, unforeseeable change in circumstances.

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Comments

1. Paul Fivat (former Ambassador of Switzerland to Japan)

You are linking two ideas :

- Diplomatic Japanese offensive, even lead, to achieve a more equitable vaccine distribution to the benefit of LDC's
- Cancelling the Tokyo Olympic games 2021 because of the pandemic situation on the basis of the *rebus sic stantibus* clause.

The first idea seems to serve as a signal that Japan would not be acting in a selfish-defensive way but in accordance with a priority choice in fighting the spreading of the virus and advocating better solidarity within the international community.

I fully understand your position. But my own view would be somewhat different.

I do consider the solidarity need for equitable distribution as urgent in the enlightened self interest of all the countries which can help in one way or another. Nobody will be safe on this planet as long as the pandemic is still active anywhere in the world. (I am no medical doctor but my reading induces me to believe that as long as general herd immunity is not achieved - and achieved only thanks to rapid world-scale vaccination - variants will develop more and more. It is in my view no surprise that variants appeared in Britain, in Brasil, in South Africa and now in the US, where the danger was ignored and the initial response botched (to say the least). In this respect, liberal Asia was much more alert and efficient (Taiwan, Korea and also Japan) (As we have seen in Switzerland during the second wave, any relaxation too early can have fateful consequences and defeat the results of a good initial strategy).

In other words: whatever the final decision regarding the Olympic Games, Japan is expected (a.o. like G-20 countries, Switzerland etc) to vigorously and rapidly join the efforts towards more equitable vaccine distribution (by producing, sharing surpluses or financing vaccines).

Regarding the Tokyo Olympics, the matter is somewhat tricky.

On the one hand, especially under the current circumstances when young people and active generations have to accept significant sacrifices in solidarity with older people like us so that we can benefit of the residual life expectancy which modern standard of living and healthcare allows for, televised international sports competitions do play an important entertainment and moral support role for a very significant share of the average population (without alluding in the least to *panem and circenses*). Furthermore, everywhere in the world athletes have already accomplished enormous efforts in preparation of the Olympic games (which would be postponed for a second time), and the vanity of these efforts would be painful, seized by the media and, probably, would also reverberate negatively on the popular mood.

On the other hand, as the Australians have demonstrated with the tennis tournament in Melbourne, it seems possible to organize the games in a way which can contain the risks. Japan would certainly be understood and supported if special measures like PCR-tests obligation, confinement of the athletes, limitation of public audience, quarantines would /should be imposed. A decision to cancel/postpone again should be based on science and not before, let's say, May or June in light of the latest evolution of the pandemic (I do not think that very substantive additional costs would occur for the games until then).

In any case, I would find it unfair if the sole Japanese Government would have to bear responsibility for a cancellation/postponement. It should be a joint (and jointly accounted for) decision by the Japanese Government, the IOC and the WHO, and, again, a decision based on binding scientific advice.

2. John West (former OECD economist, Australian)

You are absolutely right. Australians are crazy about sport, and so love the Olympics. But Australians have also been surprisingly cautious and sensible through the pandemic and would understand any decision to cancel them.

3. Jeffery Shafer (former Under Secretary of US Treasury, American)

We had the Super Bowl in the US and the Open is winding up in Australia. The athletes and the fans both badly need the Olympics and Japan has a high capacity to bring them off safely They should proceed with strict protocols.

4. Jean Zwahlen (former member of the Board of the Swiss National Bank)

Je suis avec attention les développements concernant les Jeux olympiques à Tokyo.

Les implications sont nombreuses et opposent fortement les camps.
Je suis personnellement de l'avis qu'il vaudrait mieux les annuler ou, au mieux, en faire une manifestation retransmise par video sans avoir l'affluence du public sur les stades.

5. John Martin (former Director of OECD Employment and Social Affairs Directorate, Irish)

On this question, I find myself torn between the two sides of the argument. I could foresee the Games going ahead if a certain number of conditions are satisfied beforehand: very low infection rates in Tokyo and the other areas where the Olympic events are being held; all competitors to be vaccinated prior to competing; strict low limits on the numbers of spectators allowed at the venues. If these conditions cannot be met, then I would lean towards cancellation.

6. Bernard Hugonnier (former Deputy Director of OECD Education and Skills Directorate, French)

The Olympics are, along with the FIFA World Cup, the only real occasions for the whole world to share something in common and ignites, allowing strong bonds to be formed, friendships to be developed across borders and the world to become more united and caring. Without the games, the beauty of the competitions and of the performance of the athletes, there is a risk that the world will deteriorate, and close in on national egoisms. What a pity !

Given the COVID-19 pandemic and its variants, can we keep the Tokyo Olympics? While recognizing that it will be difficult, that iron discipline will have to prevail, all health precautions will have to be taken, it should be possible. But as the spectators could not be as numerous, as all the competitions could not be possible either and as all the countries could not be present, the atmosphere of the games will be different of course and will not have the success that we expected from games organized by Japan. Accordingly, the Tokyo games should be postponed again, but certainly not cancelled.

(posted on 20 February 2021, Central European Time)

7. Janos Cegledy (pianist, New Zealander living in Japan)

“The aim of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to the creation of a peaceful and better world by educating young people through sports based on the Olympic spirit of mutual understanding, friendship, solidarity and fair play, without discrimination of any kind.”

This is very hypocritical. From past experience one could reword it as follows;

The aim of the Olympic Movement is to make a lot of money for many rich people running over hyped companies producing non essential goods by creating bitter competition between countries to win by whatever means, including using unauthorized and harmful drugs and developing technologies to boost performance of competitors beyond their natural abilities.

The spectacle of the Olympics whether viewed live or on TV sedentarily (whilst possibly consuming large quantities of beer and popcorn) does not contribute to world health or fair play, though it might build friendship among viewers who have no better or more creative ways to fill their lives than to inactively observe other people's achievements.

As you gather, I am no great fan of modern day Olympics. The original idealistic concept has been corrupted beyond recognition. Only the slogan remains. Hitler used it for propaganda and host countries used the Olympics to bolster their national image and economy.

As for the Tokyo Olympics, it is an insane idea to hold it in the summer, when temperatures could rise above 40 degrees Celsius. To hold it before the pandemic has been fully eradicated is nothing short of irresponsible.

(posted on 20 February 2021, Japan Standard Time)

8. Rinaldo Pecchioli (former Deputy Director of OECD Fiscal, Financial and Enterprise Affairs, Italian)

Your point is a tricky one, as it is always the case with the politics of the Games -- witness what the Ancient Greeks had to say! For us Italians, the Rome 1960 Olympics still have a special symbolic status: they were the proof that the remnant's of WWII were finally over and we had regained our place in the international community. And oldies like myself still have a vivid memory of a barefoot Abebe Bikila smiling while dominating the marathon amidst a cheering crowd worth of the "triumphs" held during the Roman Empire. But that was yesterday. Nowadays the Olympics have just become a gigantic, beautiful (!?) TV show, which can be performed without the presence of the public. And as with all TV shows, I am afraid that the original spirit of the Games has become completely irrelevant. Given this caveat, Japan can go ahead with the Games -- given your ability to handle the remaining risks for the sanitary situation. I cannot assess the economic implications of a "no-public" Games but I am sure that your authorities will not fall into the financial Greek trap of 2004.

Yesterday was the closing of the World Ski Championship in Cortina. It was run without any public -- and the first broad conclusions are that it was not so different in terms of attraction and results than the previous ones. Let's face it: we live in a different world where physical proximity in "elite" sports is no longer necessary.

(posted on 22 February 2021, Central European Time)

9. Richard Dyck (scholar and business man, American living in Japan)

In general, I have never been a sports fan. Nonetheless, I watched Osaka Naomi's matches at the Australia Open this week, and I was thrilled when she won (just a few hours ago).

It is rare for me to watch any sports event, and today was one of those rare days. Why? I admire the way that Naomi has risen above a difficult childhood to become a world class champion. I like her modesty and open personality. It was a challenge to hold the Australia Open during the pandemic, and all of the athletes had to quarantine in isolation for two weeks. So all of them were playing under a handicap. I found that inspiring.

They persevered, and that is admirable.

The vast amounts of money which flows for a major event, like the Australia Open, disgusts me. But the money flows because of the drama of the matches and the exceptional talent of the athletes. Even people like me, who do not usually watch sports events, spent two hours today watching the match. So, because it draws so many people, it also draws a lot of money.

The problem with the Olympics is that the money is ruling the event. The reason for scheduling the Olympics in July/August is because of NBC broadcasting. The 1964 Olympics were held in October, which is a perfect time for Japan.

It would be better if the Olympics were held in the best season for the athletes, and then NBC and other broadcasters can make their decisions accordingly. Unfortunately, money determines the timing.

Nonetheless, I am hoping that we can have the Olympics this year. Perhaps one condition is that all athletes and all spectators need to be vaccinated.

Just like the Australia Open was held during the pandemic, I think it would be an accomplishment to hold a safe Olympics this year.

(posted on 20 February 2021, Japan Standard Time)

I think that Mr. Pecchioli's comments make sense. They resonate with my view.

Once again, after Osaka Naomi's "Grand Slam" win at Melbourne, we had the inspiring performance yesterday of Ikee Rikako in the 50 meter butterfly. Her win is inspiring to young and old, because of her recent recovery from Leukemia.

The exertion of athletes can be inspiring. Of course, because so much money flows, it can also be corrupt and selfish. But it is the individual effort and talent which inspires us.

As somebody living in Japan, I also hope that the Olympics gives the Japanese government motivation to do well with the vaccine.

(posted on 23 February 2021, Japan Standard Time)