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On the Cancellation of the Tokyo Olympics this summer

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Justin McCurry in Tokyo contributed an article titled “Tokyo Olympics: definitely going ahead unless cancelled again?” to the 2 February 2021 issue of *The Guardian*, UK newspaper, in which he reported that “Almost a year after Tokyo 2020 became the first Games to be postponed in the modern Olympics’ 125-year history, officials and politicians face opposition from the Japanese public and, crucially, skepticism among athletes, sponsors and volunteers. As the world grapples with a pandemic that has killed more than 2 million people, the official line is that the Games will open, as planned, on 23 July” (1).

On the recent remark by Thomas Bach, the head of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), that “We are not speculating whether the Games will take place. We are working on how the Games will take place”, McCurry reminded the readers of *The Guardian* that the last time Bach insisted there was “no plan B” was in March 2020, just days before the pandemic – and reality – finally caught up with the Olympic movement.

My take on this issue is that:

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.

Informed about these ideas of mine, Paul Fivat, former Ambassador of Switzerland to Japan, thinks that the first idea seems to serve as a signal that Japan will 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. While fully understanding my position, he also let me know that he “considers 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. In other words, whatever the final decision regarding the Olympic Games, Japan is expected to vigorously and rapidly join the efforts towards more equitable vaccine distribution by producing, sharing surpluses or financing vaccines” (2).

Regarding the Tokyo Olympics, he thinks that the matter is somewhat tricky, adding that “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 based on binding scientific advice”.

John West, an Australian economist living in Sydney, considers that I am absolutely right and added that “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”.

After the closing of the World Ski Championship in Cortina in Italy, Rinaldo Pecchioli, Italian and former Deputy Director of OECD Fiscal, Financial and Enterprise Affairs let me know that “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”. At the same time, he noted: “Nowadays the Olympics have just become a gigantic 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”.

Bernard Hugonnier, French and former Deputy Director of OECD Education and Skills Directorate, argues that “all health precautions will have to be taken; the spectators could not be numerous; all the competitions could not be possible either; all the countries could not be present, and the atmosphere of the Games would be different of course and would not have the success that we expected from the Games organized by Japan”. Accordingly, he concludes: “the Tokyo Games should be postponed again, but certainly not cancelled”.

I take this comment by my French friend to mean that he is basically in line with Osaka Mayor Ichiro Matsui’s claim that the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games should be postponed to 2024 because of the coronavirus crisis. Matsui, who also leads Japan Innovation Party, reportedly told *The Mainichi* newspaper that organisers and the IOC should aim for 2024 and the following two Olympics after Tokyo 2020 - Paris 2024 and Los Angeles 2028 should also be pushed back by four years in a coronavirus-enforced reshuffle. Matsui reportedly said that "The whole world is facing unprecedented times" and argued that Japan should assume the role of negotiating with the IOC, aiming for the Games to be held in 2024 (3).

This view resonates with me. Let us recall that Pierre de Coubertin, the inventor of the modern Olympic Games, the first of which took place in Athens in 1896, believed that they would unite all nations in friendship and peace through sport. This is exactly what the world need right now.

Notes:

(1) <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/feb/02/tokyo-olympics-definitely-going-ahead-unless-cancelled-again>

(2) <http://office.shigehara.online.fr/PDF/20.02.2021.pdf>

(3) <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1103255/osaka-mayor-tokyo-2020-postponed-2024>

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<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/08/28/commentary/japan-commentary/japans-war-crimes-colonialism-apologies/>