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Sport, politics and the political neutrality of the IOC
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Merci pour votre accueil si chaleureux ici à Genève. C'est toujours un grand plaisir d'être parmi des amis ici dans cette ville connue dans le monde entier comme un centre de la diplomatie, des droits de l'homme et de l'esprit humanitaire.

J'apprécie beaucoup cette invitation car elle me donne l'occasion de discuter du thème du sport, de la politique et de la neutralité politique du CIO. Venant du monde du sport, la promotion de cet «esprit de Genève», comme aiment à l'appeler nos hôtes, est quelque chose auquel je suis très sensible. Au sein du Mouvement olympique, nous voulons rendre le monde meilleur grâce au sport et promouvoir notre esprit olympique de paix et de respect. J'espère qu'aujourd'hui, nous verrons encore plus de similitudes entre «l'esprit de Genève» et l'esprit olympique.

The overarching mission of the IOC is to put sport at the service of humanity. This social mission is firmly anchored in the Olympic Charter, which states: "The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity".

The only way that the IOC can realise this mission is through a strict commitment to political neutrality. Only this principle of political neutrality ensures that the Olympic Games can stand above and beyond political differences and bring the world together in peaceful competition.

This means that we have to be neutral in every respect. In Olympic sport, all people are equal, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, social status, cultural background, or belief. Therefore, we stand against discrimination of any kind. This principle of non-discrimination allows sport to promote peace and understanding among all people because the same rule of sport applies to everybody. Only in this way the Olympic Games can build bridges and bring together the entire world in all its diversity, in what we call, unity in diversity.



The Olympic Village, where the athletes live during the competitions, exemplifies this spirit. There we have athletes from all 206 National Olympic Committees in the world living together peacefully under one roof. They share their meals, they share their experience and their emotions. They are competitors in sport, but they also share their respect for each other in victory and defeat. This Olympic spirit is the defining experience for all Olympic athletes.

Speaking in PyeongChang, the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, said the following after his visit to the Olympic Village: "I have to confess that I would like to see the same harmony, the same fraternity, the same capacity to respect each other and to work with each other, in the General Assembly and the Security Council of the United Nations. I hope one day we will get there."

He made these remarks in the context of the close cooperation between the IOC and the UN. The IOC enjoys Permanent Observer status at the UN. Our cooperation with the UN is based on a Memorandum of Understanding we signed in 2014 which created a formal framework for collaboration in many important areas where sport can promote peace and development. The important role of sport in society was acknowledged by the UN, when sport was recognised as an "important enabler" to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The UN General Assembly adopted a number of resolutions recognising the autonomy and leadership role of the IOC. The Secretary-General summed up this close cooperation when he said: "The UN does not need any other voice to express its position in sport. Our voice is the voice of the International Olympic Committee."

Like no other event, the Olympic Games have the power to bring all of humanity together in all its diversity: North and South, East and West, women and men, rivals and friends, rich and poor.

While the IOC must always be politically neutral, we cannot be apolitical. We do not live on an isolated island, we live in the middle of society. As an organisation dedicated to make the world a better place through sport, we know that we have the responsibility to play our part in society. We know that the world is run by politics and not by sport organisations. But many of our decisions have an impact on political issues. We have to take this always into consideration when taking such decisions.



Whereas governments have their defined areas of responsibility in society, our responsibility is to ensure the application of the Olympic Charter at the Olympic Games. This applies equally to all athletes and to all participants of the Olympic Games. It guarantees basic equal rights for everyone during the Olympic Games, such as non-discrimination or freedom of the press to report from the Olympic Games.

One of the concrete ways we are ensuring this, is by including such basic rights in our host city contract. In this way, the host cities and host countries commit themselves already as candidates for hosting the Olympic Games. They commit themselves to respect the Olympic Charter and the host city contract for all participants of the Games and all Games-related matters. We have recently made changes to the host city contract, which now includes a specific section designed to strengthen and protect human rights. The obligations now include that human rights as well as labour rights are respected in line with international agreements and standards, including the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

We can accomplish our mission only if our political neutrality is respected by politics. If this political neutrality is not respected, then the Olympic Games become divisive rather than unifying. If this political neutrality is not respected, then it is impossible for us to bring together all the athletes of all the 206 National Olympic Committees in peaceful competition. If this political neutrality is not respected, sport would become a political football. The Olympic Games would become a stage to promote the political ends that politics cannot achieve otherwise. The most blatant expression of such disrespect are calls for boycotts of sporting events, or boycotting host countries of sporting events. Such kinds of sport boycotts are against the mission of the Olympic Games to build bridges. They destroy the principle of political neutrality and have been proven to achieve nothing at all.

Only if our political neutrality is respected then the IOC can play an active role to make the world a better place through sport. An illustration of this was when the IOC created the first Refugee Olympic Team at the Olympic Games Rio 2016. For the first time in Olympic history, ten refugee athletes competed side by side with the teams from all 206 National Olympic Committees. There the IOC maintained its political neutrality, by having the NOCs of the countries that the athletes were fleeing from, agree to their participation. With this team at the Olympic Games Rio 2016, the IOC sent a symbol of hope for all refugees in the world.



With the Olympic Winter Games PyeongChang 2018, the IOC sent a message of peace to the world. Also this was only possible by applying the principle of neutrality and trying to keep the Olympic Games above all political tensions.

We all remember the incredible moment at the Opening Ceremony, when the athletes from the NOCs of the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea marched as one team behind one flag, the Korean Unification Flag.

This moment did not happen just by chance. It was a long and often difficult journey to get there. This journey illustrates perfectly how important it is to stay true to our principles, in particular the principle of political neutrality.

Only a few months ago, the thought of both Korean teams marching peacefully together seemed impossible. We were facing missile launches, nuclear tests, aggressive rhetoric and sabre-rattling reminiscent of and more virulent than during the Cold War era.

We always knew how difficult it would be. This is why the IOC took the initiative already in 2014 to address this special political situation. In 2014, I began preliminary talks at the highest level of government with different partners to explore the political implications of holding Olympic Winter Games on the Korean Peninsula.

It was also during this time in 2014, that the IOC started a special programme for athletes from the DPRK to support them in the qualification process for the Olympic Winter Games PyeongChang 2018. We did so out of our firm belief in the universality of the Olympic Games, that athletes regardless of their background and from all NOCs in the world should participate in the Olympic Games.

When I met with the President of the Republic of Korea, Moon Jae-in, shortly after him taking office in May 2017, we agreed that the participation of the athletes from the DPRK in PyeongChang would be the priority and task for the IOC, while President Moon and his government would support the IOC initiative on the political side whenever needed and appropriate. This cooperation is another good example of how politics and sport can work together if the political neutrality and autonomy of sport are respected.



The tensions on the Korean Peninsula escalated further during the second half of 2017. A series of missile tests and a nuclear test by the DPRK were followed by counter-measures, including sanctions by the US and the United Nations. The tensions at the time were so high that the question of the participation of the DPRK took a back seat. Instead, at this moment we were confronted with the fundamental question of whether the Olympic Games could take place at all on the Korean Peninsula under such circumstances. At this moment, it became even more important to promote a solution grounded in our principles of political neutrality, dialogue and diplomacy. Therefore, in all my meetings with government leaders, I stressed the mission of the Olympic Games to build bridges and bring people together in peace and sport.

Maybe the most difficult moment of political tensions, with even military confrontation looking more likely than ever, was in September 2017 during the UN General Assembly. Nevertheless, in all my meetings at this UN General Assembly, I received assurances from relevant Heads of State and Government that they would respect the mission of the Olympic Games and take it into consideration as far as they could go. With these assurances, we decided to stand by the side of our Korean partners and not to talk about a Plan B. Talking about such a Plan B would have sent the wrong message and would have undermined the efforts of those that were working towards a diplomatic solution.

It was under these circumstances that the Olympic Truce took on additional significance. In ancient Greece, the tradition of the *ekecheria* was a sacred truce between the Greek city states. The Olympic Truce ensured a halt of hostilities, allowing the safe passage and participation of athletes and spectators to the Olympic Games. In our modern times, the IOC and United Nations have revived this ancient tradition. Before every edition of the Olympic Games, the Member States of the UN adopt the Olympic Truce resolution, calling for a cessation of hostilities for the Games to take place in peace.

Ahead of the Olympic Winter Games PyeongChang 2018, the IOC, in close cooperation with the government of the Republic of Korea, helped to promote the adoption of the Olympic Truce resolution. Given the special circumstances of holding the Olympic Games on the Korean Peninsula, we, initiated a new wording for the first operative clause of the resolution urging the UN Member States: “to ensure the safe passage, access and participation of athletes, officials and all other accredited persons taking part in the Olympic Winter Games



and Paralympic Winter Games.” This specific call was of particular importance for the Olympic Winter Games PyeongChang 2018. This joint initiative then led to a record number of UN Member States to co-sponsor the resolution and its adoption by consensus in November 2017.

At the same time, the IOC intensified its contacts with the DPRK to continue to support the athletes in their qualification. Also thanks to this support, a figure skating pair qualified for PyeongChang. But they did not register in time. Therefore, we extended the deadline and granted an additional quota place in order to make their participation possible nevertheless. In numerous discussions and negotiations with the NOC of DPRK, the response to a potential participation of their athletes was never a “no”, but always fell short of a clear “yes”. During all this time, we therefore kept the door open for their participation.

When the final commitment of the DPRK for their participation was made clear in the 2018 New Year’s message of the leader of the DPRK, I immediately called for a meeting on 20 January 2018 in Lausanne between the IOC, the two NOCs, the two governments and the Organising Committee of the Games.

The meeting resulted in all parties signing the “Olympic Korean Peninsula Declaration”. This declaration contained exceptional decisions of the IOC to make the participation and joint activities of the two teams possible. These decisions resulted in the two delegations marching together as one, under the name Korea and behind the one Korean Unification flag, at the Opening Ceremony. It also resulted in the formation of a unified women’s ice hockey team with players from the two NOCs. For the first time in their Olympic history, the two NOCs united to compete as one team in a sport.

By the way, this meeting was the reason why I had to postpone the first scheduled date to speak here at this Forum. It was a volatile situation so I hope that under such circumstances, I hope that you accept my apologies.

If somebody thought that with this agreement on 20 January everything was sorted, they were wrong. The delicate political discussions came up again 24 hours before the Opening Ceremony. Additional conditions were raised by the DPRK with regards to the joint march and flag. On the evening before the Opening Ceremony, the DPRK indicated in a meeting



with us that they may not participate in the Games at all. This is why I had to resume the talks again, starting in the morning of the day of the Opening Ceremony on 9 February 2018. These talks ultimately led to the positive result, just four hours before the Opening Ceremony.

When then the athletes from the NOCs of the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea entered the Olympic stadium as one team, behind the one flag, it sent a powerful message of peace from the Korean Peninsula to the world. When then the unified women's ice hockey team played in a crowded arena with incredible support from the spectators, it showed the world the unifying power of sport. There was a very positive response to this important gesture from all corners of the world.

We were happy and proud to see all our efforts become reality. But if I am honest, I was also much relieved, because until the very last moment, we could not be sure that we would succeed.

It was a long and difficult journey. Just like the political tensions will not disappear overnight, we know that sport alone cannot create peace. But the Olympic Games can open the way to dialogue, can open the way to a more peaceful future.

Korea's journey does not end here with the Olympic Winter Games. We are very happy to see that the two, or now even three, governments are using the momentum from the Olympic Games to start discussions on the political level. It is our wish for the Korean people, and indeed for the whole world, that this dialogue in the Olympic spirit will lead to a peaceful future on the Korean Peninsula, and for the entire world.

At the beginning of my remarks, I mentioned that the overall mission of the IOC is to put sport at the service of humanity. By remaining true to our principle of political neutrality, we have achieved exactly that in PyeongChang. The IOC will continue our Olympic dialogue with the NOC of DPRK and all other related parties, maintaining its principle of strict political neutrality.

We all share the same vision of making the world a better place. We do so through sport, you do so through your humanitarian or diplomatic work. You can call it the "spirit of Geneva" or



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the Olympic spirit, but what is most important is that we are united in the same belief in a better future for humankind, based on our shared values of peace, respect and understanding. If we stay true to these principles, I am sure that we can make much progress together for the sake of all of humanity.