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Switzerland's Olympic heroes have most likely put their hard-earned Beijing medals aside by now and are already looking ahead to training for the next winter season. But let us take a quick look back at the Games for a moment. Unusually, not one member of the Swiss government was there in Beijing to congratulate our gold medal winners. Neither the sports minister, Viola Amherd, nor the president of the Swiss Confederation, Ignazio Cassis.

It's a bit complicated. The Swiss government had long been pondering whether to send a diplomatic delegation to the Olympics. As you may remember, several countries including the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand had already decided not to send any government representatives to Beijing. What would the Swiss do? Join the diplomatic boycott, because Berne naturally also abhors China's policy on minorities and human rights? Or travel to China regardless – as a sign of respect towards Switzerland's third-biggest trading partner?

Finally, the Federal Council announced on a cold and foggy January day that it would not be travelling to China. Not out of protest, but because its members were needed at home due to the Covid situation, and because diplomatic meetings in Beijing were not possible anyway. This was not the most convincing of excuses.

History has shown how delicate relations between Berne and Beijing can be. Back in 1950, Switzerland became one of the first Western nations to start developing ties with the People's Republic. Yet the association with China has always been complicated – and could get trickier still. As we explain in this edition's Focus article, Switzerland's deliberately pragmatic approach to China is under scrutiny. Switzerland's protestations of neutrality are increasingly untenable, given how forthright on China its neighbours and friends have become. Sooner or later, Berne will also have to nail its colours to the mast. Simply saying that pragmatism and neutrality should not be mistaken for indifference and opportunism is unlikely to work in the long term.

Despite all the politicking, it would be remiss of us not to mention some of Switzerland's most brilliant Winter Olympians. You will find their “gold-etched” names at the end of this magazine.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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