

IOC Agenda 2020: Strategic Roadmap for a Joint Abu Dhabi/Dubai Olympic Bid?

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The Committee voted on (and unanimously supported) a wide-ranging plan put forward by IOC President, Thomas Bach, referred to as “Agenda 2020”. Agenda 2020 is a set of rules that substantially change the way the IOC conducts its business, outlines how it interacts with stakeholders and sets new parameters for the very structure of the Olympic Games (the “Games”) themselves. The reforms reach the core of the Games, opening the possibility for new competitions to be included (provided a total agreed number of events is maintained), for greater community engagement and education to be promoted as well as increasing transparency and good governance in management, to name but a few.

This bold step amounts to a comprehensive roadmap for reform that is characterised by engagement and flexibility. At a time when we have seen increased criticism of the processes and the organisations holding rights to major global sporting events, this marks a welcome change. On examination, Agenda 2020 should be welcomed as the IOC’s significant step towards greater transparency and responsiveness, each of which will ultimately be crucial elements of the IOC’s continued relevance.

Each of the 40-points adopted in the plan are worthy of independent consideration; however, for the scope of the current article, the liberalisation of the bid process to potentially include joint bids by cities (or even countries) is an area we should consider more closely, particularly in the face of a potential bid from the Middle East. Qatar has voiced a clear desire to host the Games, as recently re-iterated by the Secretary General of the Qatar Olympic Committee ; however, with the recent rule changes, the possibility of an Abu Dhabi/Dubai bid could also prove a compelling possibility. The new system of flexibility in approach to bidding allows for interaction between the IOC and potential host bidders prior to the host cities embarking on what has become a highly demanding and expensive two-year process of launching a formal bid.

It is to be hoped that this change in the rules will lead to improved communication with a preliminary exchange of information between the class of exploratory hosts and the IOC that should ultimately increase the likelihood of the best suited and motivated candidates proceeding through the process at a mutually advantageous time (i.e., when they will be best able to host and showcase the Games to a high standard and when the Games would be most beneficial for them).

There are growing signs that Dubai may be considering an Olympic bid in the near to medium term. As has been noted previously, there would be great inherent strength in a United Arab Emirates bid that combines the resources of the UAE Capital and Dubai in an Abu Dhabi/Dubai Games. Whereas we could not previously consider such a combination because of the rules, the IOC’s adoption of Agenda 2020 has thrown open the door to a formal joint bid. There are compelling reasons to believe that the combined transportation, hard and soft infrastructure and resources of these dynamic powers – not to mention the growing track record of excellence in regularly hosting successful sporting events to the highest global standards – could be combined to stage a potentially sensational Summer Olympics.

We can go a step further in recognising that IOC Vice-President John Coates noted that despite the new possibility of joint bids, the compactness of the bid is always an important component. Given the proximity and excellent transportation between Abu Dhabi and Dubai, a joint Abu Dhabi/Dubai bid could

arguably be as geographically compact as a number of past Games held at venues across a single expansive urban area. In effect, a case could be made that an Abu Dhabi/Dubai bid could be one of the least logistically disruptive combinations for a joint bid imaginable. This would be a prudent way for the IOC to stress-test the first run out of a joint Summer Games bid under the new rules.

Regardless of the status on a potential bid for the first ever Games in the Middle East, the Agenda 2020 IOC reforms are a welcome step. The package of reforms will require implementation and there could be slips along the way with such an ambitious plan but where the alternatives include minor incremental adjustment or inaction, this is a show of leadership at just the right time.

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