

Olympic Dreams or Security Nightmares? – The Global Competition for Security in Sports

The American Navy command ship USS *Mount Whitney* and the guided missile frigate *Taylor* are sitting in the Black Sea in case Americans need to be evacuated and other security measures are required. What the Pentagon is standing by for isn't political unrest or a natural disaster in the Balkans or the Middle East. It's the Sochi Olympics.

The Boston Marathon bombings in April 2013 proved, yet again, that no venue is safe from attack. Even athletics. Premiere international sporting events have typically brought countries together in the spirit of peaceful competition. The Olympics' opening ceremonies even feature a call for world peace during the games and a symbolic releasing of doves. Despite many moments of athletic excellence and sportsmanship, the Olympics have twice been marred by terrorist violence. During the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, 11 members of the Israeli Olympic team were taken hostage and eventually killed by the Palestinian group Black September. Almost a quarter of a century later, a terrorist bomb attack on the Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta during the 1996 Summer Olympics claimed the lives of two and injured 111 people. The sports world has never been immune from politics, controversy or cheating. However, is it ready to be on the frontlines in the fight for national and global security?

The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics have been plagued with more security concerns than past Games. "There are a number of specific threats of varying degrees of credibility that we're tracking," said Matthew Olsen, director of the National Counterterrorism Center. "And we're working very closely with the Russians and with other partners to monitor any threats we see and to disrupt those."¹ Islamist militants from the turbulent Caucasus region, which Russia has long-standing fighting, are a leading threat. One such separatist group claimed responsibility for twin bomb attacks in Volgograd that killed 34 people in December 2013. Another group, Emirats Kavkaz, has repeatedly expressed a desire to target the Sochi games. These groups may not have to travel far, as alpine events will be held in the Caucasus Mountains. Security forces have also been on the lookout for Black Widows, female suicide bombers avenging slain insurgents. Less likely, but possible threats are from jihadists returning from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.²

Threats mounted fast in the days leading up to the games. Five countries reported that their Olympic Committees received letters threatening attacks. A letter to the Austrian Olympic Committee threatened to kidnap two female athletes. Two days before the opening ceremonies, the U.S. reiterated concerns and "sent an advisory to airlines that fly into Russia, warning them that recent intelligence suggests terrorists might try to smuggle explosives onto planes by using toothpaste tubes."³ As part of their security preparations, the Russians have added over 37,000 extra troops and police and imposed a "ring of steel" around the Olympic venues. "The threat has prompted the Kremlin to mount what officials and experts have described as the most extensive security operations in the history of sporting events, sealing off the city and conducting months of operations."⁴

¹ Laura Smith-Spark & Nick Paton Walsh, "United States reveals 'specific' threats to Olympic Games," *CNN*, February 4, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/02/04/world/europe/russia-sochi-winter-olympics/>.

² Frank Gardner, "Sochi Olympics: How safe are the Games?" *BBC News*, January 26, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25881560>.

³ Richard Engel, "Sochi 'Open Hunting Season for Hackers,'" *NBC News*, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/sochi-olympics/richard-engel-sochi-open-hunting-season-hackers-n22346>.

⁴ Steven Lee Myers, "An Olympics in the Shadow of a War Zone," *New York Times*, February 5, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/05/world/europe/an-olympics-in-the-shadow-of-a-war-zone.html?hp&_r=2.

The most credible threats to attendees, surprisingly, may be within the law. U.S. CERT (Computer Emergency Readiness Team) published security tips on potential cyber risks in Russia. It warned against Russia's extensive – and legal – communications surveillance system, which allows them to monitor, intercept and block all electronic communications, including cellular. Personal electronic devices and software were also noted to be vulnerable to interception or confiscation. "Therefore, it is important that attendees understand communications while at the Games should not be considered private."⁵ Pickpockets and other petty criminals have also moved their operations online. U.S. CERT warned against fake Olympics websites and domains used for spam or spear-phishing campaigns, as well as delivering malware to end users.⁶

Perhaps a less considered, but potentially more disruptive, risk arises from corruption. The Sochi Olympics look to be the most expensive ever, with the costs for new venues and infrastructure allegedly coming in at over \$51 billion (\$10 billion more than the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics), although Russian officials assert the figure is closer to \$6.4 billion. In December, former deputy prime minister and fierce critic of Vladimir Putin, Boris Nemtsov, questioned the whereabouts of \$20-30 billion in a report titled "Winter Olympics in the Sub-Tropics: Corruption and Abuse in Sochi."⁷ Embezzlements and kickbacks potentially diminish not only the quality of facilities and services at the Games, but also the security forces and resources at their disposal. Furthermore, bribery can create unparalleled access for terror groups and threat actors to Olympic venues and infrastructure.

Concerns won't end after the closing ceremonies. Russia is poised to host the World Cup in 2018, where the same terrorism, cyber security, and corruption risks will continue, if not grow. Before that, Brazil will host the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics. While Brazil doesn't have Russia's history or risk of terror and cyber threats, corruption is already taking a toll. Skyrocketing costs, workers' safety and forced relocation of people for construction of new facilities have agitated many Brazilians. A movement called "No World Cup" has been protesting the social inequality, corruption, and costs arising from World Cup preparations. "The Brazilian president has had to take out an ad campaign to defend the World Cup. There's now a government ban on protesters wearing masks." As a result, the 2014 event is expected to be one of the most expensive simply because of the cost of security.⁸

On the horizon is 2022 World Cup in Qatar. FIFA, soccer's ruling world body, caused a storm by selecting the small Arab country with no soccer pedigree to host the prestigious tournament. Already reeling from a bribery scandal, evidence and comments from "FIFA's second in command suggested the desert nation had 'bought' the right to host the world's biggest single-sport event."⁹ FIFA's President later admitted that political influence to pick Qatar came from European leaders because of major economic interests in the oil-rich nation.¹⁰ In the meantime, Qatar is building all tournament facilities from scratch at a cost ranging from \$100 to \$220 billion. An exposé of working conditions for

⁵ U.S. CERT, "Security Tip (ST14-001), Sochi 2014 Olympic Games," February 05, 2014, <http://www.us-cert.gov/ncas/tips/ST14-001>.

⁶ Zeljka Zorz, "Cyber risks awaiting visitors and viewers of Sochi 2014 Olympics," *Help Net Security*, February 5, 2014, <http://www.net-security.org/secworld.php?id=16315>.

⁷ Nic Robertson and James Masters, "Sochi 2014: Do the numbers add up?" *CNN*, January 20, 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/01/20/sport/russia-sochi-putin/index.html>.

⁸ Robin Young, "Concerns Over Brazil's Readiness For World Cup And Summer Olympics," *WBUR (Boston)*, February 5, 2014, <http://hereandnow.wbur.org/2014/02/05/brazil-readiness-concerns>.

⁹ "Scandal spreads to 2022 Cup bid," *Associated Press*, May 30, 2011, http://espn.go.com/sports/soccer/news/_/id/6606997/fifa-bribery-scandal-spreads-qatar-world-cup-bid.

¹⁰ Jonathan Harwood, "UEFA backs winter World Cup as Blatter admits foul play," *The Week*, September 19, 2013, <http://www.theweek.co.uk/football/qatar-world-cup/55220/uefa-backs-winter-world-cup-blatter-admits-foul-play>.

migrant laborers “found evidence of forced labor and conditions amounting to slavery on the huge World Cup infrastructure project.”¹¹ Other reports estimate the deaths of 4,000 (mainly Southeast Asian workers) during stadium construction.

Location has also been controversial. Qatar is in the middle of the testiest regions in the world and critics are quick to point to Qatar’s long-standing relationship to Hamas. In the summer of 2013, over twenty U.S. Congressmen sent a letter to the Qatari Ambassador questioning the country’s strong financial and defense ties to the terror organization.¹² Direct ties between senior Qatari Football Association officials and Hamas are also evident. A Qatari Royal who is the President of the Qatar Football Association met with Hamas Prime Minister in April 2013 to reportedly discuss Qatar-Hamas relations.” Another Qatari Royal who served as Chairman of the country’s World Cup security committee co-chaired a meeting with Hamas’ Interior Minister where training and equipment was pledged to strengthen Hamas’ security capabilities.¹³ These ties are unlikely to be cut anytime soon.

Any large-scale, high-visibility event poses security risks, typically from crime to violence. For example, Super Bowl 48 in February was preceded by the arrest of 45 people and the rescue of sixteen minors (some reported missing by their families) involved in a prostitution crackdown, highlighting an escalating human trafficking crisis.¹⁴ However, the Sochi Olympics have pushed the sports world into the forefront of national and global security more than any previous sporting event. Future events in Russia, Brazil and Qatar are already showing signs of trouble. Similarly, the confidence in Pyeongchang, South Korea (2018 Winter Olympics) and Tokyo (2020 Summer Olympics) to hold textbook events is matched by Asia Pacific tensions, particularly with North Korea and China.

The Sochi Olympics may well go without a hitch, but growing threats, such as terrorism, cyber attacks, and corruption, cannot be shelved after the closing ceremonies. Looking ahead is imperative. Risks must be assessed and responsibly mitigated from the day host cities and nations submit their bids. Recognizing the potential opportunities as seen by terrorists (and all threat actors) and implementing well thought out security and intelligence measures early-on is the best game plan. All of sports must now take greater heed of the safety, vulnerability, and credibility of their events. It’s in the details where near fail-safe arrangements pay off. Neglecting even the smallest detail or dismissing the least likely of scenarios could prove tragic.

The Olympic creed reminds athletes that participating in the games is more important than simply winning. “The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.” For some adversaries looking to strike, having the opportunity to fight may be all they need.

¹¹ Harwood, *ibid.*

¹² Jonathan Schanzer, “Confronting Qatar’s Hamas Ties,” *Politico*, July 10, 2013, <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/07/congress-qatar-stop-funding-hamas-93965.html>.

¹³ David Schenker, “FIFA Has a Terrorism Problem,” The Washington Institute, January 23, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/fifa-has-a-terrorism-proble>.

¹⁴ Marina Lopes, “45 arrested, 16 juveniles rescued in Super Bowl prostitution bust,” *Reuters*, February 4, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/04/us-nfl-superbowl-prostitution-idUSBREA131BB20140204>.