

Resilience through lockdown: Reflections on 'total security' preparations for London 2012

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Is Olympic security provision disproportionate to the threats faced? In recent years international sporting spectacles such as Olympic Games have merged with dystopian images of cities under siege as terrorist risk has seen resilience and security professionals attempt to deliver events in maximum safety and with minimum schedule disruption. However, spectacular events are also spectacular targets, defended through highly militarised tactics and detailed and expensive contingency planning. In other words, lockdown military security has become an essential part of ensuring (temporary) resilience for sporting mega-events (Coaffee et al., 2011). Although such tactics and strategies are being rolled out for London 2012 in response to a range of perceived threats and disruptive challenges, they are by no means unprecedented.

The 'superpanopticon' advanced in preparation for Athens 2004 - the first post-9/11 Summer Olympics - exemplifies this trend (Samatas, 2007). In the midst of the 'war on terror', Athens spent well over five times the security budget of Sydney 2000, deploying over 70,000 specially trained police and soldiers at Olympic venues whilst another 35,000 military personnel patrolled the streets. The military hardware utilised included 13,000 surveillance cameras, mobile surveillance vans, chemical detectors, Patriot anti-aircraft missile sites, NATO troops specialising in weapons of mass destruction, AWACS early warning surveillance planes, police helicopters, fighter jets, minesweepers and monitoring airships (see also Coaffee and Fussey, 2010).

In the UK, the securitising of sporting spectacles has become increasingly prominent as London gears up to hosting the Olympic Games. Not only did security concerns and responses play a critical part in the bidding process; they also dominated media discussion immediately after the host city was announced. On 7/7/2005, the day after the announcement, a series of co-ordinated terrorist bomb attacks took place on the London transport network, prompting even more detailed security plans which could see the initial security bill quadruple from £225 million to over £1 billion, and the adoption of advanced biometric security systems to monitor crowds and athletes and to track suspects across the city (Fussey et al., 2011). Uniquely, in London's case, Olympic security concerns have been grafted over a pre-existing security infrastructure, one which has evolved over many years due to the threat of Irish Republican and other forms of terrorism. As noted by the Metropolitan Police Authority in 2007:

The 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games will require the largest security operation ever conducted in the United Kingdom. The success of the Games will be ultimately dependant on the provision of a safe and secure environment free from a major incident resulting in loss of life. The challenge is demanding; the global security situation continues to be characterised by instability with international terrorism and organised crime being a key component.

In March 2011 an updated *Olympic and Paralympic Safety and Security Strategy* (Home Office, 2011) set out the key aims and objectives for the police and government in delivering a safe and secure Olympic Games. The strategy's overarching aim was 'to deliver a safe and secure Games, in keeping with the Olympic culture and spirit' (p.7). This strategy was in line with the latest revised UK National Security Strategy; *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security*

Strategy (October 2010) and was operationalised in line with the third iteration of the UK's overarching counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST (HM Government, 2011). The CONTEST strategy itself specifically focused on the 2012 Games, noting that the UK has guaranteed to the International Olympic Committee that it will 'take all financial, planning and operational measures necessary to guarantee the safety and the peaceful celebration of the Games' (p.105). Specifically, it highlighted a set of issues related to the threat and response to possible terrorist attack:

Terrorism poses the greatest security threat to the Games. Experience from previous Games and elsewhere indicates that global sporting events provide an attractive and high-profile target for terrorist groups, particularly given the potential for malicious activity to receive enormous international publicity. London 2012 will take place in an unprecedentedly high threat environment. Threat levels can change rapidly but by planning against a threat level of Severe we have maximised our flexibility to respond to a range of threats (HM Government, 2011: 106).

The final preparations for Olympic security planning are now underway, managed by the UK Security Services, the Olympic Security Directorate and multi stakeholder London Resilience Forum who have developed detailed pre-emptive security plans to sit alongside pre-existing resilience plans, to plan out vulnerabilities in advance. Most recently, in May 2012 'Operation Olympic Guardian' began - a pre-emptive scenario-planning exercise intended to test security and resilience preparedness ahead of the Games. This has involved the testing of air missile defence systems, the responsiveness of Typhoon jet forces and the establishment of 'No-fly' Zones over London. As one BBC correspondent noted, such an exercise has the potential both to alarm and reassure in equal measure:

Exercise Olympic Guardian is an opportunity to fine-tune military plans. But it is also aimed at reassuring the public. The Olympics is the biggest global sporting event and the world will be watching. The sound of fighter jets and military helicopters, along with the sight of the Royal Navy's largest warship, HMS Ocean, in the Thames may reassure many. But for some, just talk of this military hardware is causing alarm - most notably the plans to station ground-based air defence systems at six sites around the capital (BBC News, 2012a).

Campaign groups such as the 'Stop the War' coalition have accused the government of causing unnecessary alarm and a 'climate of fear' in the capital (BBC News 2012b). Such claims are exacerbated by related plans to site anti-aircraft missiles on the top of East London tower blocks whose residents learned, through leaflets, that a high velocity missile system would likely be placed on a nearby water tower offering a perfect view of the nearby Olympic Park (BBC News 2012c).

Such militarisation of the immediate environs of this high profile sporting event should however come as no surprise given the standardisation of security that has become an accepted part of the Olympics over the last thirty years. As the Games draw near and interest in all aspects of 2012 preparation rises, security-related stories are increasingly common in the print media both in the UK and worldwide. For example, a selection of those which emerged in May 2012 highlights a wide-ranging set of issues that both LOCOG (the *London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games*) and Londoners will be forced to confront this summer.

Many reports highlight the use of military hardware to control city spaces, airspace or transport corridors: 'Ministry of Defence to control London airspace during Games for first time since Second World War' (Daily Telegraph, 2012); 'Anti-terrorism tool at forefront of 2012 London Olympic security' (Alaska Dispatch, 2012); 'Sonic device deployed in London during Olympics' (BBC News London, 2012); and, 'Armoured cars drafted in as security tightens ahead of the Olympic Games' (Daily Mirror, 2012).

Other reports highlight a set of issues regarding policing the Games in what will be an unprecedented UK peacetime operation, seeing up to 12,000 officers from 52 forces deployed at 'peak time', alongside private security staff, and the utilisation of novel security technologies: 'Metropolitan police plastic bullets stockpile up to 10,000 after UK riots - Scotland Yard confirms August unrest has led to increase in stock of baton rounds as security measures upped before Olympics' (The Guardian, 2012a); 'Metropolitan Police double officers around torch as crowds bigger than predicted' (Daily Telegraph, 2012); 'Metropolitan Police given 350 mobile fingerprint scanners in Olympics policing boost' (V3 News, 2012); 'Former Royal Marines to ferry around super-rich Games spectators' (London Evening Standard, 2012); and 'Flaws in vetting security staff being trained for the Olympics' (ITV News, 2012).

As the Games approach, the everyday impact both on Londoners and visitors to the capital, and the possibility of protest, are also being highlighted in the media: 'Fish photographer caught in Olympics terror alert: A man taking photos of a fish tank was stopped by a security guard who was supposed to be alert for hostile reconnaissance amid pre-Olympics terrorism fears' (Amateur Photographer, 2012); 'Olympics welcome does not extend to all in London as police flex muscles; Dispersal zone at Olympic Park will target anti-social behaviour, and there are claims sex workers are being cleansed', (The Guardian, 2012b); and, Olympic crackdown: UK govt targets protests (Russia Today, 2012).

However, the lockdown security that London will increasingly experience - both as the Olympics approach and during the event itself - raises questions over the proportionality of the security effort and the extent to which local people have been consulted, over security and resilience plans that will affect their neighbourhoods both now and into the future, once the well-protected Olympic flame goes out.

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