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Securing the Olympics

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Security has been a major issue and challenge at all recent Olympic Games and failures of that security (as in Atlanta in 1996) surely weigh heavily on the minds of Olympic planners. However, the Beijing Olympics have been marked not only by their incredible security preparations, but also by foreign scrutiny and suspicion because of China’s international reputation as a heavily-policed state. Here, Eric Setzekorn shares what he is seeing on the ground in Beijing.

By Eric Setzekorn

More than any state-of-the-art sports complex or amazing athletic performance, many visitors will remember the Beijing Olympics as the world’s largest security event. In an effort to squelch any sort of protest or more serious terrorist act the government has instituted strict new rules and enforced many existing but hitherto disregarded laws. Estimates of total security personnel range from 250,000 to 500,000, depending on the criteria, but visitors should be either alarmed or comforted to know their every action is monitored and scrutinized.

The epicenter for Olympic security is Tiananmen Square. Since 1989 and even more so since the Falun Gong crackdown, Tiananmen Square has boasted a comprehensive security plan based on numerous security cameras backed by scores of uniformed and plainclothes police. New checkpoints have been established at all entrances to the Square and are equipped with larger than average cameras, most likely biometric scanners, and all bags are thoroughly searched. The level of scrutiny is high—after inspecting not only my bag but a folder of articles inside, I was asked by the polite but stern officer why I carried several papers regarding Chinese politics.

In the square itself much of the large area has been subdivided and occupied with space-filling decorations. A large area of plants and trees has been constructed in the northeastern corner between the Square and Chang’an Avenue. Large barriers block direct line of site from Mao’s Mausoleum toward the Forbidden City. While this ruins much of the stark beauty of the square it makes sense from a security and crowd control perspective.
In a smart public relations move, most police and military officers patrolling the square are unarmed except for pepper spray and a taser. Long black vans parked nearby hold SWAT teams if there is any real trouble and the lack of overt weapons makes the police presence less intimidating to ordinary visitors than the AK-47-carrying soldiers that typically inhabit the Square.

Leaving the square and walking along Chang’an Avenue long rows of local university students line the road at 40-foot intervals. Given a t-shirt, fanny pack, and sun umbrella (teal for boys, purple for girls) they stand motionless unless approached to ask for directions or information. Given only a small stipend for meals and transportation, they volunteered because of a genuine desire to help the Beijing Olympics but also to practice their English.
In less commercial areas, this type of duty is relegated to older residents who are given an orange and white Olympic shirt and a red armband saying they are a “public safety officer,” and who then sit in front of their buildings on low stools chatting and fanning themselves in the heat. These “officers” have no real duties to perform, schedule to maintain, or uniform to wear. For men, rolling their shirts up above their stomachs seems to be popular, as is wearing large sun hats for the women. While it does appear somewhat comical with small groups of retirees sitting every 50 feet they are probably the best monitoring system imaginable. Although given no training, having no English skills, and bringing their own cell phones to call the local patrolmen directly if there is “trouble,” they are an extremely cost effective and numerous auxiliary force. As a secondary benefit, for the price of a t-shirt, sponsored by Yanjing Beer, they are made to feel they are part of and responsible for the success of the Olympic games.
Outside the second ring road, security decreases with an emphasis on regular patrols by foot and car. Police are now much more visible directing traffic at major intersections and assisting traffic wardens to clear accidents quickly. When motorcades or VIPs are on the move, small groups of heavily armed military police occupy strategic intersections in full uniform with helmet, body armor, and assault rifles. Due to stringent housing laws that were previously un-enforced, private housing areas have also increased security and tightened regulations. These rules are designed to limit a large floating population of foreigners and domestic tourists that could be hard to track during the games.

Most housing areas have installed gates manned 24 hours a day to separate residents from any potential guests who must proceed to the local police station for a temporary residence permit. Large police sweeps of twenty to thirty officers going through housing blocks for any unauthorized visitors seem mainly to inconvenience the large floating Korean student population in the Haidian district and stops landlords from renting apartments at huge mark-ups for the month of August.

While there is clearly a need for a comprehensive and large security presence at obvious targets during the Olympics, for many visitors the true symbols of the Beijing’s Games could be the 6th and 7th Fuwas, JingJing and ChaCha (jingchab being the Chinese word for police).

Tags: The 2008 Beijing Olympics