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Terrorist Threat to Sochi Olympics: Testing Time for Russia

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Synopsis

The suicide bombings in Volgograd and the threat of attacks by terrorists underscore a changed reality confronting a resurgent Russia. The Winter Olympic Games 2014 in Sochi will test Russia's counter-terrorism capabilities.

Commentary

ON 18 JANUARY 2014, a little known militant group, the *Ansar al-Sunnah* ("The Helpers of Sunnah") claimed responsibility for the December 2013 twin suicide bombings in the Russian city of Volgograd, which killed 33 people and injured 65 others. The group also threatened Russia with further attacks, including using chemical weapons, claiming that they have a "surprise" for the visitors and hosts of the Sochi Winter Olympics 2014.

As the 22nd Winter Olympic Games are already underway in the Russian resort city of Sochi, there is widespread speculation whether Russia can ensure security for this grand event. The city is located in the close vicinity of Volgograd (formerly known as Stalingrad) and the North Caucasus Federal District of Russia. North Caucasus has been a turbulent zone which witnessed ethno-separatist conflicts and terrorist activities from 1991 to 2009.

International concerns

The concerns of the international community about the security of the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi are primarily based on the perceived threat emanating from North Caucasus. However, is there a palpable terrorist threat to the Sochi Winter Olympic Games? Why have the Olympics in Russia been subjected to such a threat?

The Volgograd attacks were the first time that the *Ansar al-Sunnah* militant group was involved in terrorist activities in Russia. There is limited information available on this group. However, the statements made by the *Ansar al-Sunnah* issued in January 2014 on the website of the Vilayat Dagestan (VD), a subgroup of the Caucasus Emirate (CE), indicate that it is a newly-established radical group within the CE.

Founded in 2007 as the successor to the self-proclaimed virtual state of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI), the Caucasus Emirate group aims to create an independent Islamic state in Russia's North Caucasus and beyond. Unlike its predecessor, CE believes in global jihad. The group lost support of the populace in the North Caucasus when Moscow's counter-insurgency strategy (winning "hearts and minds") appeared to have

succeeded in the late 2000s.

To regain public support and to centralise small militant groups in the North Caucasus under its control, the group adopted Salafist-jihadist ideologies and transformed itself into a global jihadi movement. It was at this point that the insurgency in the North Caucasus arguably joined the global jihad. The CE is now the central body in the network of militant groups in North Caucasus and beyond. The group is composed of a hierarchy of five highly autonomous and flexible regional sub-units (“vilayats”) including the Vilayat Dagestan (VD).

A testing time for Russia?

The Caucasus Emirate had started its active “anti-Olympiad” campaign in June 2013, when the group’s leader, Dokku Umarov, publicly urged his followers to disrupt the Sochi Games by all means possible. His call was followed by the triple suicide bombings in Volgograd in October and December of 2013, showing that these militants have the capacity to carry out attacks in Russia.

Furthermore, it is not new for the Olympic Games to be attacked or threatened by terrorists. There were two successful terrorist attacks of the Olympics throughout its 118-year history: the Black September attack at the 1972 Munich Games and the 1996 nail-bomb attack in Atlanta. During the Beijing Olympics in 2008, an attempt to bomb an aircraft, which was flying from China’s Xinjiang province to Beijing, was foiled.

In the case of Sochi, the opportunity for the militants to carry out middle or large-scale attacks inside the Olympic village is very limited due to the extensive security measures undertaken by the Russian authorities. The Russian government is fully cognisant of the possible terrorist attacks since Umarov’s statement.

The Russian government has allocated US\$ 2.5 billion for the Olympics security alone. It has put in place elaborate security arrangements in Sochi, creating a “security cordon” there. Approximately 100,000 police and security personnel have been deployed, and layers of security measures have been adopted using advanced technology, including drones, robots for searching and defusing explosives, and ultrasound scanners and thermal-imaging cameras.

However, in many other parts of Russia, security measures are not as intense, and there is the possibility of terrorists taking advantage of this vulnerability. The suicide bombings in Volgograd in October and December 2013 are examples.

Importance of Olympics for Russia

For Moscow, a successful hosting of the Winter Olympics will bring it international renown just as the Beijing Olympics showcased China’s rise. More than 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin is eager to show Russia’s “reemergence” as a world power. It is seen as an opportunity to showcase the developments in Russia under Putin’s leadership to the world.

Secondly, the Olympics are seen as a test to gauge Putin’s capacity to ensure the security of Russia particularly in its North Caucasus region. Over the past years, the Russian government has dealt with the Chechen insurgency. Since the end of the Russian military campaign in Chechnya in 2009, Russia invested heavily in building infrastructure and took successful measures to win “the hearts and minds” of the populace there.

Thirdly, the Olympics are intended to promote southern Russia as an international tourist destination. A major network of mountain resorts have already been developed throughout the region as it has considerable tourism potential. With the new infrastructure built for Sochi Olympics, Russia aims to become a new tourist destination which will boost the economy of southern Russia.

Well-crafted terrorist strategy

As a successful hosting will undoubtedly improve Russia’s image globally, the Sochi Olympics are a critical test for Moscow. The media coverage Russia is getting might invite terrorist groups like the Caucasus Emirate to gain publicity even if with smaller incidents. In spite of Russia’s preparedness black swan incidents cannot be ruled out.

In pursuit of this strategy, it is a possibility that the suicide terrorist tactics used in Volgograd may be replicated during the Games outside Sochi – in Volgograd again or in any other city or town in close proximity to the Olympic Games venues.

For terrorists, it is not really necessary to target Sochi which seems to be a “hard target”. In reality, any attack

on the Russian homeland will serve the purpose of showing their presence. Therefore, the Sochi Olympics will be a critical time for Russia.

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