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Security of Sports Venues: Protecting Events from Terrorism

By Sulastri Osman and Joseph Franco

Synopsis

Large-capacity sporting venues have been attractive targets for terrorists keen on carrying out spectacular attacks. How best to overcome the security conundrum that, while hardening targets might reduce vulnerabilities, overt security presence could paradoxically attract attackers?

Commentary

SINGAPORE'S ASPIRATION to be a key centre for international sporting events reaches new heights with the scheduled opening of the S\$1.3 billion Sports Hub in June 2014. Billed as a premier sports, entertainment and lifestyle destination located at the Kallang waterfront, the Sports Hub is a 33-hectare complex comprising venues such as the new 55,000-seat National Stadium, the 13,000-seat Singapore Indoor Stadium, and the 6,000-seat Aquatic Centre.

Major sports meets such as the SEA Swimming Championships and the Rugby World Club 10s are set for kick off, and with community sporting facilities also onsite, the Hub will see activities all year round.

"Inspired" targeting of sporting events

Such a collection of sports venues also attracts the attention of non-sporting groups. The 12th issue of *Inspire*, a publication of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), carried instructions on how to construct a car bomb that will cause maximum damage in "places flooded with individuals".

The magazine has gained notoriety for encouraging the use of violence and disseminating the know-hows of planning attacks and assembling improvised explosives – in essence, providing the capability to complement the violent motivations it espouses. Listed specifically as targets for attacks are upcoming sporting events such as the US Open tennis tournament, the FA Cup and Premier League football matches in the United Kingdom, and the League Cup in France.

While it is untenable to make a claim that *Inspire* articles translate into attacks, dismissing the magazine as irrelevant, however, is also imprudent. It was revealed during the trial of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the lone surviving suspect of the Boston Marathon bombings that the Tsarnaev brothers had learned to construct their improvised explosive devices from the first issue of *Inspire*. Their pressure cooker bombs were similar to the device described in the how-to article titled: "Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom".

Terrorism as spectacle

The targeting of sporting events is not new. The attack on the Boston Marathon was preceded by the 1996 Atlanta Olympics bombing and the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre. In South Asia, the Sri Lankan cricket team was attacked near a stadium in Pakistan in 2009, and in 2008 a suicide bomb went off at the starting point of an annual marathon in Sri Lanka. Closer to Singapore, bombs exploded outside a stadium in Aceh during a football game in 2001.

Sporting events are essentially “soft targets”; they are intrinsically hard to secure given the large number of spectators and participants at a venue. For those with ill intentions, such a dense crowd will yield more casualties with relatively simple weapons. Moreover, there is lesser risk of pre-attack detection and greater chances of post-attack evasion amidst a panicking crowd.

That said, operational considerations are often secondary to a more potent reason behind choosing to target sporting events. Such events provide terrorists with a captive audience for their violent spectacle. Terrorism is, after all, an act of political signalling - of affecting social behaviour and government policies through the deliberate targeting of civilians. Attackers may claim that the attacks are an end in themselves to wear down the capabilities of security forces. Such tactical goals though, serve the strategy of projecting an image of strength and undermining confidence in the authorities.

Security paradox: Hardened targets, attractive targets?

The traditional response of governments and security authorities is to “harden” potential targets: installing physical barriers and surveillance equipment, limiting access to sporting sites, and deploying security forces. This was evident in the run-up to the highly tensed 2014 Winter Olympics at Sochi with the Russian authorities repeatedly pledging to boost security, only to be met with repeated threats from Chechen militant groups to disrupt the Games. Six weeks to the opening ceremony, two successive suicide bombings in the Russian city of Volgograd - adjacent to the restive North Caucasus region - demonstrated the resolve and capability of militants to strike close to the Games.

Sochi 2014, fortunately, passed without incident, but also not without a costly “ring of steel” security clampdown. Overt security measures appeared to validate the traditional approach to hardening targets. Yet the Russian case is hardly the best example. For one, ongoing military engagement in neighbouring restive regions where rebel forces were concentrated needed to be sustained.

Following the Russian context, one would still need to deploy thousands of special operations, intelligence and local law enforcement units. Such measures could not be more disruptive and are hardly sustainable for extended periods of time. Constraining the movement of people and a heightened state of anxiety are also inimical to the spirit of the Olympics.

Accordingly, a key lesson is this: as much as terrorism is a form of signalling, so is counterterrorism.

A growing body of research, as exemplified by a study from the University of Sydney, has revealed how in some cases hardening public venues can paradoxically lead to more insecurity. On one hand, defending conspicuous targets can result in potential attackers seeking more accessible and possibly numerous other targets. On the other hand, a hardened target can also prompt attackers to seek deadlier attack methods.

A separate research has shed light on a correlation between increased hardness of targets and the likelihood of suicide bomb attacks. Simply put, signalling that a target is worth defending makes it more attractive to attackers.

Time for strong but subtle security

In aspiring to be a world-class sporting destination, Singapore can balance security with preparedness. Risk mitigation, for instance, can come in the form of physical infrastructure security. Blast-resistant glass and shrapnel-preventing structures are becoming construction staples incorporated early in the design process of new venues and facilities. There is policymaking and industry consensus that embedding security right into the physical infrastructure is less costly than when security is introduced as an afterthought.

Secure buildings and smart security designs reduce the need for overt displays of security presence at sporting events. This in turn reduces the perceived attractiveness of a target to potential attackers.

Sound infrastructure alone cannot offer security. This is why existing programmes like the Security Watch

Group (SWG) Scheme, which is a collaborative effort between the police and the commercial sector to tactically harden their premises against potential attacks, must continue to be enhanced.

In addition, robust but lower-profile initiatives such as the Singapore Maritime Crisis Centre encourage information-sharing among relevant stakeholders in the maritime community with various agencies responsible for national security. These provide the foundation for early disruption of terrorist plots. Joint public exercises such as Northstar VIII (2011), Heartbeat (2013), and High Crest (2013) on the other hand help stress-test existing protocols in responding to terrorist incidents.

The opening of the Sports Hub and the ever-increasing attractions of Singapore as a popular sporting venue necessitates the balancing of appropriate measures to prepare for and respond to potential threats. Examples from overseas affirm the quiet effectiveness of strong but subtle security.

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