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Sochi: Security and Counterterrorism at the 2014 Winter Olympics

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Two bomb attacks, carried out by suicide bombers at a railway station and a bus in Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad), 500 miles southeast of Moscow, shattered the pre-holiday spirit as Russians prepared to celebrate the New Year. Up to 45 people, including children, were killed, and over 100 were injured, many of them severely; the death count is sure to climb.

The Olympic Winter Games are fast approaching. Scheduled for February 7 to 23 in the Russian city of Sochi, this high-profile global occasion has created a platform for Russia to show off its strength in hosting an international event. However, serious concerns about Olympic security are yet to be addressed.

The Russian government under President Vladimir Putin has recently stepped up efforts to secure the Olympic park, including the Olympic Villages in the Olympic Mountain Cluster and Olympic Coastal Cluster, as well as Sochi's seaport, railroad terminal, airport, and national parks.¹ Russia has made security enforcement its primary focus in preparing for the Olympic spectacle. Olympic security is being led by the Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor to the Soviet Union's KGB. The FSB will lead roughly 100,000 security personnel in protecting the games

and the city of Sochi overall.² It is far from certain, however, that they will be successful, as the targets are many, the terrain is difficult, and the Russian security standards are in need of improvement.

The Threats. Islamist insurgencies in the Russian North Caucasus, porous borders between Russia and neighboring countries, lone-wolf terrorists, global Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, organized crime, cyber attacks, and violent protests are just some of the possible threats.

The region of the North Caucasus, to which Sochi is adjacent, exists in an atmosphere of low-level anti-Russian Islamist insurgencies. Armed skirmishes between the Russian federal security forces and extremist rebels in North Caucasus republics such as Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria are almost a daily occurrence. The Kremlin has difficulty containing these insurgents and cutting their supply of weapons due to the Islamist propaganda, social failure, high unemployment, corruption, and heavy-handed tactics of law enforcement and the secret police. Insufficient surveillance of Russia's borders with other post-Soviet states is also a factor.³

It is clear that Russia has failed to fully identify and neutralize the armed Salafi underground in Dagestan, Chechnya, and elsewhere. The political and religious struggle between traditional Caucasus Sufi Islam and the Wahhabi extremism imported from the Middle East is continuing, and the local elites and their Russian bosses do not know how to handle the situation.

Several radical groups are currently active in the North Caucasus. They include Jamaat Shariat, officially the Dagestani Front of the Caucasus Emirate's Armed Forces; Yarmuk Jamaat, officially the Armed

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Forces of the United Vilayat (Province) of Kabarda–Balkaria–Karachay; Ingush Jamaat, Riyyadus Salihin headed by Amir Khamzat; and Doku Umarov’s Caucasian Emirate, established in 2007 and declared a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department on May 26, 2011.⁴ The threat from these groups is likely to increase during the Olympics, as successful attacks would give them international coverage—something that is generally hard for them to achieve due to the difficult access to the region for both domestic and international journalists.⁵ Russian security forces have foiled terror plans against the Black Sea resort of Sochi, accusing Chechen separatists and neighboring Georgia of jointly masterminding the plans.⁶

Lone Wolfs. Keeping the possibility of a lone-wolf attack in mind is imperative. Leading up to the games, contingency plans and dry runs should take place in order to prepare for an active threat. Increased communications between boots-on-the-ground and those at the operational and strategic level must be continuous and fluid as the games progress. Without constant information sharing, Sochi risks a lone wolf slipping through the gaps.

Protests. Recent protests surrounding civil rights issues have sparked immense controversy and protests against the Russian leadership, as well as against the Sochi Olympics. As a result, the threat to safety at the Olympics from possibly violent protests has drawn concern. As international athletes enter Russia, the question remains how they will be protected from protestors, heavy-handed Russian law enforcement, and pro-government vigilantes. Should protests escalate in Sochi, brutal responses by the Russians could affect the overall stability and security of the winter games.

Security at the Olympics. To make the Sochi Olympics more secure, the U.S. government should request that the Russian leadership release its Olympic security protocols to the U.S. and to the Olympic committee on how it plans to address potential security threats. In addition:

- The U.S. government should urge maximized information and intelligence sharing between participating Olympic nations, with the goal of limiting transnational support for any terrorist activities associated with the games. This is a role the U.S. has effectively, competently, and responsibly carried out for previous Olympiads.
- Due to Russia’s abysmal human rights record, the U.S. should demand that the Russian leadership produce a clear and concise description of enforcement measures and regulations before the winter games begin, along with a Russian guarantee of restraint with regard to civil liberties. The U.S. should also insist that Russian government actions not adversely affect Olympic athletes and visitors to the Olympic park.
- The U.S. should set expectations for what it sees as responsible and acceptable security measures, including making clear the necessity of local law enforcement securing the perimeters of major metropolitan cities. Local policing efforts must be implemented responsibly, both protecting public safety and respecting human rights—of Russian citizens and foreign visitors. The 24-hour threat hotline should also be expanded to include smaller communities.

1. “Sochi 2014: A Security Challenge,” Stratfor, December 9, 2013, <http://www.stratfor.com/sample/analysis/sochi-2014-security-challenge> (accessed December 9, 2013).

2. Ibid.

3. Vladimir Frolov, “A Global Power Can’t Have Porous Borders,” *The Moscow Times*, October 28, 2013, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/a-global-power-cant-have-porous-borders/488532.html> (accessed December 14, 2013).

4. “Designation of Caucasus Emirate,” U.S. Department of State, May 26, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/05/164312.htm> (accessed July 1, 2013).

5. Michael Schwartz, “Journalist Is Shot Dead in Russia’s North Caucasus Region,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/17/world/europe/journalist-is-shot-dead-in-russias-north-caucasus-region.html?_r=0 (accessed December 14, 2013).

6. “Russian Secret Service: Sochi 2014 Olympics Terror Attack Foiled in Breakaway Republic of Abkhazia,” CBS News, May 10, 2012, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/russian-secret-service-sochi-2014-olympics-terror-attack-foiled-in-breakaway-republic-of-abkhazia/> (accessed December 9, 2013).

- The U.S. government should advise Americans visiting the Olympics to be wary of a possible attack at all times. It is never easy to ensure security at major events, especially in a volatile area such as the North Caucasus. Maintaining situational awareness at all times is essential to decreasing the possibility of being caught off-guard. Protests and lone-wolf attacks are all possible in the areas surrounding the games. Local advisory systems should be implemented in order to issue warnings or announce important safety information surrounding and leading up to the games.

Essential Security for a Safe Olympics. As the world mourns the victims of Volgograd, Russians and non-Russians alike must brace themselves for more—and bloodier—terror attacks in Russia, including during the Olympics next month. Moscow would be well served by expanding its security cooperation with countries that have a good track record of foiling terror attacks.

The Sochi 2014 Olympics will include 6,000 Olympic athletes and team members from 85 countries.⁷ Hosting such an event is a remarkable undertaking for any nation. Therefore, the U.S. should assist the Russian leadership and Olympic council to put in place comprehensive counterterrorism measures to protect the city of Sochi, the athletes, and the spectators while allowing an exciting and competitive global event to take place.

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7. "Sochi 2014 Organizing Committee Presents Competition Schedule for Olympic Winter Games in Sochi," XXII 2014 Olympic Winter Games, Sochi.ru2014, <http://www.sochi2014.com/en/media/news/69939/> (accessed December 9, 2013).