

The Party Holds The Ring: Civil-Military Relations and Olympic Security

James Mulvenon

The 2008 Beijing Olympics is China's debutante party as a global power, and the Beijing leadership made it clear that they wanted everything to go perfectly. After the riots and crackdown in Tibet, protests around the Olympic torch, and bombings in Xinjiang, however, pressure on the security apparatus to fulfill the leadership's wishes was intense. This article examines the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) role in ensuring Olympic security, assessing the implications of the security command structure for civil-military relations.

The PLA's Role in the Olympics

The 2008 Beijing Olympics is China's debutante party as a global power, and the Beijing leadership made it clear that they wanted everything to go perfectly. After the riots and crackdown in Tibet, protests around the Olympic torch, and bombings in Xinjiang, however, pressure on the security apparatus to fulfill the leadership's wishes was intense. This article examines the role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in ensuring Olympic security, assessing the implications of the security command structure for civil-military relations.

PLA preparation for the Olympics likely began soon after Beijing's successful bid for the Games in 2002. PLA support falls into roughly two categories: Olympics preparations and security work. The PLA provided massive numbers of troops for large-scale Olympic preparations. For example, military units landscaped more than 220 selected segments of Chang'an Avenue and the Airport Expressway as well as 40-odd large parks like the Olympic Forest Park.¹ PLA troops were also reportedly dredging sludge out of the rowing channels days before the start of the Games.

The PLA is also an important player in Olympics security work, but available evidence suggests that the military does not have the lead role. A conversation with then-Deputy Chief of the General Staff (Intelligence) Zhang Qinsheng in November 2006 confirmed that he was one of the three co-chairs of the Olympics Security Leading Small Group (国家奥运安保协调小组), along with the ministers of State Security and Public Security. Even then, well before the bombings in Xinjiang, General Zhang explained that the principal perceived threat emanated from the *Dongtu*, or East Turkistan Independence Movement, which claims to represent the separatist aspirations of China's Uighur minority. As the start date of the Games approached, however, China's security forces confronted a wider range of actualized threats, including unrest in Tibet, bombings in Xinjiang, and international NGO efforts to disrupt the Olympic torch relay.

Despite the escalation of perceived threats, the structure of the security command strongly suggests subordination of the military to civilian control. At the apex of the command structure sits the aforementioned Olympics Security Leading Small Group, where the PLA is first among equals with the police and internal security forces. The PLA, like the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and Ministry of State Security (MSS), also established its own command organization, which Chinese media identify as the “PLA Command Group for the Olympic Games Security” (奥运安保军队指挥小组), headed by Deputy Chief of the General Staff (Operations) Ge Zhenfeng. Similar command organizations were established at every level of the military system in relevant geographic areas, including the mobilization of more than 40,000 militiamen and reservists by provincial military commands and garrisons in Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Shenyang, Qingdao, and Qinghuangdao.² These military organizations coordinated their activities with the security department of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the 2008 Olympics (BOCOG) via a military affairs department, headed by Senior Colonel Tian Yixiang, under BOCOG.³ According to the military press, the military work department under BOCOG assumed a day-to-day operational posture on 1 July 2008.⁴

In keeping with post-Tiananmen procedures, the police under the Ministry of Public Security are responsible for maintaining security at Olympic venues and throughout the host cities. They are supported by the more heavily armed People’s Armed Police, which is subordinate to MPS in peacetime but can be chopped over to the PLA General Staff during crisis. Chinese media report that in the Olympics the PAP is primarily in charge of 12 security tasks:

standing on the alert and guarding Olympic competition venues; standing on the alert and guarding Olympic training venues; standing on the alert and guarding non-competition venues; maintaining the security at the Olympic Opening, Olympic Cultural Festival, and other large-scale activities; guarding lodgings, activity routes, and activity sites of VIP’s; guarding lodgings, activity routes, and activity sites of members of the International Olympic Committee; guarding Olympic torch relay sites and routes and escorting the protocol of the torch; guarding award-presenting distinguished guests; standing guard at the periphery and sites of Olympics-related airports and safeguarding special planes; safeguarding water, electricity, gas, oil, communications, and other pivotal facilities closely related to the Olympics; checking and publicly patrolling key business districts; and handling sudden incidents and countering terrorism and hijacking; as well as four volunteer tasks such as delivering medical aid in the Olympic Village.⁵

By contrast, Chinese media accounts suggest important, specialized, but circumscribed roles for the PLA in Olympics security. Prior to the Games, the PLA conducted antiterrorism exercises throughout the country. As an illustrative example, Beijing Military Region conducted its first exercise as early as 29 June 2007.⁶ The Tibet Autonomous Region held antiterrorism drills code-named “Sky Road [Tian Lu] 08” and

“Grand Hawk [Xiong Ying] 08” at the Lhasa train station and Lhasa Gonggar Airport.⁷ The antiterrorist exercises continued even during the Games, including a large-scale practice session in Nanjing MR and the other relevant military regions.⁸

Within the Games itself, the roles of PLA are varied and specialized. PLA units are responsible for six tasks: (1) aerial security in Beijing and competition areas outside of Beijing; (2) maritime security on the sea close to the coastal area; (3) handling nuclear, chemical, and biological terror attacks, and assisting the public security department in handling terror events such as explosions; (4) intelligence support; (5) emergency rescue, medical rescue and helicopter transportation, etc.; and (6) border control during the Olympic Games to maintain stability along the border and in coastal areas. As examples, PLA personnel are tasked to provide security and search and rescue for boaters in the Qingdao Sailing Regatta,⁹ handle dog search teams at the Qingdao Sailing Regatta facilities,¹⁰ and PLA medical teams and hospitals in every host city will be primary response facilities for any medical emergency. Specialized detachments and antiterrorist technical experts from the PLA Engineering Corps, totaling nearly 2,000 people, will be in charge of security checks, explosive detection and removal, engineering support, emergency rescue, antiterrorist engineering and technical guidance, chemical reconnaissance, chemical decontamination, nuclear monitoring, and biological defense,¹¹

The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) was also responsible for the security of the airspace over the Olympics facilities. To finalize preparations, the PLA held an Olympics Air Security Work Conference (北京奥运会空中安全保卫工作会议) from 29–30 June 2008.¹² At the meeting, speeches were given by Ge Zhenfeng; Xu Qiliang, member of the Central Military Commission and commander of the air force; Deng Changyou, political commissar of the air force; Zhao Zhongxin, deputy leader of the Air Force Command Group for the Olympic Games Security and deputy commander of the air force, who gave a briefing on the air security action plan; Yang Guohai, chief of staff of the air force, who gave a briefing on the Olympic Games air security rules; and Jing Wenchun, deputy commander of the air force. The content of the meeting focused on identifying every possible scenario for air incidents, solving all of the coordination problems inherent in coordinating among so many civilian and military actors, with the ultimate goal of “absolute security.”¹³ Principal air security missions include “low- and extra-low-altitude interception and attack” as well as the deployment of anti-aircraft artillery and missile units around Beijing.¹⁴ Other articles describe elements of PLA air security, including the deployment of helicopter gunships as part of an “air special duty detachment.”¹⁵ Perhaps the strangest aspect of the air force’s mission during the Olympics was the attempted prevention of rainfall.¹⁶ Prior to the opening ceremony, air crews flew more than 30 hours spreading chemicals (bentonite) into approaching clouds to stop them from raining on the pageant.

After Chief of the General Staff Chen Bingde ordered the troops involved in Olympic security to a “level-1 alert,”¹⁷ the first public role for the PLA was the opening ceremony, which Chinese media reported involved more than 10,000 troops, though their military affiliation was downplayed for foreign audiences.¹⁸ The four-minute “matrix” performance was carried out by 1,631 military personnel from the Beijing Military

Region who had trained for over eight months. After the ceremony, the troops were visited by an impressive array of civilian and military leaders, including Liu Qi, member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, secretary of the CPC Committee of the Beijing Municipality and chairman of the BOCOG, together with other officials of the Beijing Municipal Government and the BOCOG; Li Jinai, member of the Central Military Commission and director of the General Political Department of the PLA; Wu Shengli, member of the Central Military Commission and commander of the PLA Navy; Guo Jinlong, mayor of Beijing and the executive chairman of the BOCOG; Deputy Director of the General Political Department of the PLA Jia Ting'an; Political Commissar of the PLA Navy Liu Xiaojiang; Commander Wu Shuangzhan; and Political Commissar Yu Linxiang of the Armed Police Force.¹⁹ Other attendees included Ma Jian, deputy director of the Operations Department of the PLA General Staff Department; "leading comrades" of the Air Action Command Group; the "leading comrades" of the Ministry of Communications and Transportation; officials from Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin municipalities; officials from Hebei, Liaoning, and Shandong provinces; officials from the cities of Shenyang, Qingdao, and Qinhuangdao; command groups of the Beijing, Jinan, Nanjing, and Guangzhou military regions and the navy; and all members of the air force command group, the air force commanders and deputy commanders in charge of all military regions, and the commanders of the air force divisions, brigades, and regiments.

Implications and Conclusions

Public evidence suggests that the PLA is playing a critical but significantly circumscribed role in Olympics security. While the civilian leadership is clearly driven by an omnipresent sense of threat and an intense desire for unwavering suppression of those who would seek to disrupt China's debutante party, they appear to also be keenly sensitive to the negative optics of a strong and overt military presence in Beijing during the Games, especially given the events of June 1989. As a result, the Olympics security is largely a police effort, with special support from the People's Armed Police (PAP) and select, specialized PLA units dealing with explosive detection, emergency rescue, chemical reconnaissance, chemical decontamination, nuclear monitoring, and biological defense. To the untrained viewer, these distinctions may be lost, especially given the rough similarities between PAP and PLA uniforms, but outside analysts can conclude that the civilian leadership continues to favor a layered defense for domestic security, with police on the front line, PAP in support, and the PLA as a measure of last resort.

Notes

¹ Wei Bing and Li Bingzheng, "PLA and APF support Olympic Games," *Jiefangjun bao*, 7 August 2008.

² Wang Wenqing, "40,000 militiamen and reservists involved in Olympic security work," *Jiefangjun bao*, 11 August 2008.

³ Ma Xiangfei and Meng Na, "The BOCOG Security Deputy: The Attack on American Tourists Was an Isolated Incident; Beijing's Security Situation Is Calm and Steady," *Xinhua*, 13 August 2008; and Wu Qingcai and De Yongjian, "Tian Yixiang Says that PRC Olympic Security Departments Have Information on Movement of Terrorist Forces," *Zhongguo xinwen she*, 1 August 2008.

-
- ⁴ “Military Work Department of Olympic Security Coordinating Group starts on-duty operation,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 25 July 2008.
- ⁵ Zhang Dongbo and Zhang Haihua, “Troop Deployment for Olympic Security Has Been Completed; Armed Police Force Holds Olympic Security Expedition and Oath-Taking Rally; Meng Jianzhu and Other Attend and Speak,” *Xinhua*, 23 July 2008.
- ⁶ Zhang Kunping and Yi Qingwen, “Improving Response Capabilities, Ensuring Olympic Security—Beijing MR Organizes PLA’s First Olympic Security Operational Exercises and Demonstration Activities,” *Zhanyou bao*, 3 July 2007.
- ⁷ Liu Junwu, “Tibet Autonomous Region Successfully Holds Anti-terrorist Real-troop Exercises on 2 and 4 August,” *Zhongguo xinwen she*, 5 August 2008. For a similar exercise in Shenyang, see Yu Xin, “Sharp Sword Drawn: A Realistic Antihijacking Exercise,” *Liaoning ribao*, 25 July 2008.
- ⁸ “Servicemen in anti-terrorist exercise during Olympics,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 13 August 2008.
- ⁹ “Shipboard aircraft regiment entrusted with Olympic security work,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 14 August 2008; Zhang Lei, “Naval frogmen in Olympic security operation,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 5 August 2008; and Qian Xiaohu and Huang Chao, “Sea-land-air joint security measures to protect Olympic sailing events,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 7 August 2008.
- ¹⁰ “Special security guards’ of Qingdao Sailing Regatta,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 14 August 2008.
- ¹¹ “Special equipment fielded to safeguard Olympic Games,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 14 August 2008; Wang Sihai, “Beijing Sets Up Network of Laboratories To Deal With Emergencies and Ensure Prompt Discovery of Cases of Infectious Diseases During the Olympics,” *Xinhua*, 5 August 2008; and Guo Weihu, “Shanghai holds exercise on handling emergency NBC hazards,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 7 Aug 2008.
- ¹² Yang Qingchun, “The Beijing Olympic Games Air Security Work Conference Stressed the Need of Going All Out to Build up ‘Solid Shields’ for Protecting the Olympic Games Air Security,” *Kongjun bao*, 1 July 2008, p.1.
- ¹³ Ni Eryan, “Analysis of Characteristics of PLA’s Olympic Security,” *Wen wei po*, 15 July 2008.
- ¹⁴ Wang Min and Wang Jun, “Shenyang Military Region Air Force’s Olympics Security Mission Units Strengthen Whole System’s Ability to Handle Incidents,” *Kongjun bao*, 26 June 2008, p.1; Qiao Songbo and Fan Jianghuai, “Iron fist protecting Bird’s Nest—Views on an air-defense missile unit under the Air Force of the Beijing Military Area Command,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 18 July 2008, p.4; and Cui Wenbin, “Missile battalion carries out pertinent training for Olympic security,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 23 July 2008.
- ¹⁵ Qiao Songbai and Liu Quan, “Fully armed ‘Air sentinels’ ensure Olympic security,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 12 August 2008.
- ¹⁶ Zhang Jinyu, “Air force heads off rainfalls for Olympic Games,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 11 August 2008.
- ¹⁷ Li Yun, “All Military Units in Charge of Olympics Security Enter Level-1 Standby Duty,” *Xinhua*, 9 August 2008.
- ¹⁸ Yu Chunguang and Wei Liping, “Performance troops return to barracks,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 11 August 2008.
- ¹⁹ “Liu Qi visits officers and men in opening ceremony performance,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 14 August 2008.