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After the Olympics, What?

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By Nicolai Volland

Exactly one month before the opening of the Beijing Olympic Games, all attention seems to be focused on those magic sixteen days, from August 8 through August 24. It is surprising, however, how rarely the question is raised: what will happen once the Games are over?

In the run-up to the Summer Games, China has been placed under an undeclared state of emergency. Special regulations and restrictions are effecting almost every of daily life. Taxi drivers and Beijing residents had to brush up their English and study brochures that explained how to stand in line and be courteous to foreigners. On a more serious note, [vehicle traffic](#) in the capital will be reduced for the time of the Games, and industrial production is being [brought to a standstill](#) across vast regions of Northern China, in order to ensure blue skies over Beijing and reduce the city's notorious smog.

To heighten security, baggage screening – usually conducted at airports only – has been introduced at the Beijing subway, leading to [incredibly long queues](#), even as the system has to deal with the extra traffic caused by residents unable to move via their treasured cars, and the influx of visitors. Travelers from abroad as well as foreign residents in Beijing had to deal with [drastic new visa rules](#): embassies issue no more multiple entry visas, foreign students and self-employed foreigners can no longer extend their visas and must leave the country, and tourists must now produce return air tickets and hotel reservations to obtain their visas. Backpacking to the Olympics: *meiyou*. In addition, international academic conferences, cultural festivals, and music performances had to be cancelled for the period surrounding the Olympic Games.

Restrictions on civil rights for Chinese are more worrying. [Repression of human rights activists and lawyers](#) has increased while Beijing has issued orders to the provinces to keep any forms of social unrest under control. With an estimated 30,000 foreign journalists due to arrive in the country, the government wants to portray China as stable, prosperous, and above all harmonious. No more incidents like the [Weng'an riots](#), please! To reduce tensions, Beijing has instructed regional authorities to strictly [control the flow of petitioners](#) seeking redress in Beijing. Internet and press controls are likely to be stepped up in early August.

But what happens when the Games are over? Chinese and foreigners alike have accepted the heightened degree of control with some grumbling. Security concerns ahead of a mega-event like the Olympic Games are understandable. The common perception of the new measures as temporary in nature, lasting just a few weeks, makes them acceptable. However, will things go back to what they were after the end of the Games? Will the various restrictions end with a big bang – the lifting of the Olympic emergency? Will they be allowed to trickle out slowly, gradually reverting to the status quo ante? Or will the Chinese government adopt a more eclectic approach, trying to keep in place some of the new measures, while allowing others to fade out?

Nothing more than speculation is possible at this moment, but the Olympic Games and the massive amount of preparations for the event are certain to have implications far beyond the end of the Games on August 24. Our attention span should be longer, too, so some speculation will be in order.

The last of the scenarios outlined above is probably the most likely. Factory production cannot be halted indefinitely without an economic toll; neither will vehicle owners accept a longer than necessary ban to use their cars. But the air pollution in the capital is a very real concern, and if the "temporary" measures were to show a significant improvement on air quality, the municipal government might be tempted to consider making some of the traffic restrictions permanent, even if that means angering the newly affluent middle-class.

Visa regulations are a hassle, and are said to be responsible for a drastic drop in foreign visitor arrivals. But admittedly, the hurdles for Chinese citizens trying to obtain visas for the United States or the European Union are still significantly higher than the new Chinese visa rules. Will the government decide it can well live with less backpackers who don't spend a lot anyway, as well as hard-to-control

foreigners running their own small companies? If the current visa regime does not lead to major disruptions for business travelers, the current visa regulations might stay around for a longer time than anticipated.

Finally, the clampdown on dissent and the stricter handling on local forms of resistance (prevention of mass incidents and the flow of petitioners to Beijing) has enhanced the power of the central state, and the CCP will be unlikely to give away easily the increased leverage over local politics. There is little to be gained for the Party-state from easing controls in the area of civil liberties, and the forms of repression we witness currently might, at best, be allowed to fizzle out over a longer period of time. It is likely, however, that the central government will find it desirable to perpetuate at least some of the "emergency" powers gained in the name of a one-time event.

With the Olympic Games approaching, attention nationally and internationally is focusing on the event itself. To watch the long-term implications of the current nationwide mobilization, however, might prove to be at least as interesting as the competitions in the Olympic stadium themselves.

Tags: [The 2008 Beijing Olympics](#)