Gridlock, closed schools and a ring of steel: the view from Cardiff as NATO descends

August 29, 2014 6.00am BST

The 28 nations of NATO, each dedicated to “safeguarding the freedom and security of its members through political and military means” are about to descend on South Wales. The impact of preparing for the arrival of dignitaries such as Barack Obama, François Hollande and Angela Merkel, as well as 10,000 support staff and 2,000 journalists is being keenly felt. And with a steel fence now looming over Cardiff, many are beginning to wonder if the cost and effort are really worth it.

The summit will take place on September 4 and 5 and will include the main talks at the Celtic Manor Hotel in Newport and evening events in Cardiff. NATO members will be looking to address issues that threaten their national security, from fragile states to piracy, from terrorism to cyber-attacks.

And security is clearly a top priority for the event. A 20km steel fence now encloses the Celtic Manor along the M4 and in Cardiff, huge and imposing security fencing has been erected around the two venues holding events, causing traffic congestion in the surrounding area.

The city centre is now home to vast yellow security barriers designed to stop terrorists detonating car bombs. There are to be no-fly zones enforced and Cardiff Bay will house seven NATO ships in the week of the conference. Some 9,500 police officers will be engaged on the ground. It is, according to the Chris Armitt, the police chief in charge of the operation, “uncharted territory”.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has declared this summit “one of the most important in NATO’s history” and given the precarious state of world politics at the moment, it’s not
surprising security is tight. But the scale of operation is staggering, particularly when you factor in what world leaders will bring to the party.

Let’s consider Obama. We can’t be sure of the exact size and composition of his entourage but we can certainly predict that it will be awesome to behold. Travelling with the President will be CIA, FBI, secret service, political advisers, doctors, dieticians and so on. When he visited Brussels in March – for one day – it was with 900 staff, 45 vehicles and three aeroplanes.

Leading the motorcade down the M4 and into Cardiff will be Cadillac One, the supercar that travels with Obama on every foreign trip. This is a machine that reportedly includes eight-inch plates capable of stopping an improvised explosive device and five-inch multi-layer windows that make the doors as heavy as those on a 757 jet. It is also sealed against biochemical attacks and contains a blood bank matching the president’s type.

Now consider that Obama is only one of 67 heads of states and foreign secretaries. He might have the biggest toys but you can bet Merkel won’t be arriving alone in a mini cab.

Then come the journalists, who are by no means getting a raw deal. The thousands of media professionals covering the summit must be accredited to enter the media centre but once they get there, they won’t be disappointed. NATO is of course dependent on good publicity and with the media centre it appears every effort has been made to make the reporters jobs as comfortable as possible. There will be a working area of 900 spaces, screens displaying broadcast feeds from the summit and edit booths. As an added bonus, tea, coffee and water will be available free of charge.

Besides all this there are the protesters to consider. The South Wales Argus states some 20,000 are expected, with events planned throughout their stay. There will be a counter summit – probably without any armoured Cadillacs – a week-long peace camp and frequent marches, the biggest of which will probably be by Stop the War on August 30.

Meanwhile, for those those of us who live and work in the affected areas of South Wales, the interference into our daily lives started early. The disruption caused by this two-day event stretches over a month. Traffic problems continue to mount in and around Cardiff and, over in Newport, the majority of schools are being closed during the summit.

While much of the cost of this event will be carried by NATO, there are other financial implications when such a gargantuan event takes place in a working, city environment. The month-long road closures will clearly have an impact.

In the very short term of course, the summit may well prove to be a boon for the hoteliers and caterers of South Wales. First minister Carwyn Jones, thinks this is a great opportunity for Wales to show its business worth to the world and he might be right.

As Lori Healey, an organiser of a previous summit in Chicago, pointed out:
You could spend millions of dollars on advertising around the world to try to attract tourists, but to have them to be able to come and think wow, this is a really beautiful place, maybe I will bring my family back here, maybe I will recommend this to people to come and visit. You can’t even put a price tag on that.

This is just PR speak, but to be fair to the summit organisers it appears that great efforts have been made to showcase Welsh talent. Students from Cardiff Metropolitan University programmes are to help prepare a dinner for the delegates and a South Walian cabinet maker has crafted two vast conference tables for the summit. It’s made from four tonnes of wood, including oak sourced from a firm in Swansea and laminated wood from Cardiff.

In many ways, we can be glad that the arrival of NATO is putting South Wales in the spotlight. For two days next week, we’ll be the centre of the world. And we all accept that the security is probably necessary. But getting through the two days of events, protests, motorcades, marches and functions will test the patience of all involved.