

Obama Vows to Destroy Islamic State, How Should Taiwan React?

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On the eve of the 13th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attack, U.S. President Barack Obama made the most important decision since taking power, vowing to destroy the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) terrorist organization, which recently beheaded two U.S. journalists and has made threats against the United States. In conjunction with airstrikes, Obama announced that Washington would build an international coalition and support moderate Sunni and Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria. Obama immediately dispatched U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on a shuttle diplomacy mission to the Arab world, while National Security Advisor Susan Rice sought Chinese assistance for strengthening the multinational alliance against ISIS. Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping are expected to discuss further bilateral cooperation on the sidelines of the Economic Leaders' Meeting in the coming Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum to be held in Beijing in November.

In his address to the nation, Obama spelled out a clear objective vowing: "We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIS through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy." He said Washington will support Iraqi government troops and moderate Syrian opposition groups to help them reclaim territory seized by ISIS forces. He said Washington will work to cut off ISIS funding in concert with the global financial system. Since multiple challenges stand in the way of these three objectives, these are most likely not achievable in the short-term. Very

likely, this campaign will turn into a war that lasts many years, dragging on into the term of the next U.S. president.

In early August, Obama gave orders to bomb ISIS positions in northern Iraq from the air. Since the Iraqi government provided intelligence, this campaign temporarily weakened the ISIS. However, it also drove ISIS into Syria, creating a new challenge for Washington's strategy of encircling ISIS on all sides, further complicating the already poor relationship between Washington and Syria's authoritarian leader Bashar al-Assad. Washington has consistently refused to recognize the legitimacy of Assad's election as president; last year after Assad used chemical weapons on Syrian rebels, Obama pulled back from a missile strike at the last minute only because of stiff congressional resistance. After ISIS occupied swathes of northern Syria, Assad asked the international community for support but also demanded that the United States seek his consent before bombing ISIS positions in Syrian territory. The United States' uncompromising stance against Assad will impede its efforts to eliminate the ISIS forces inside Syria.

Another diplomatic strategy the United States continues is to support the reshuffled Iraqi government under Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, after Shiite leader Nouri al-Maliki, who had alienated the country's Sunni and Kurdish minorities, was forced to relinquish the premiership. Washington will provide combat training and operational assistance to the new

Iraqi government but insists that no ground troops will be dispatched to prevent an adverse effect on public opinion at home from U.S. war casualties.

The turnaround in Obama's diplomatic strategy was inevitable for several reasons. During his election campaigns in 2008 and 2012 Obama courted the majority of American voters who were fed up with U.S. military engagement abroad, pledging a foreign policy that "withdraws troops in exchange for peace" and guarantees the safety of the American homeland. However, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq created a power vacuum, allowing the militant Sunni organization ISIS, originally only a branch of al-Qaeda, to quickly increase its reach. ISIS speedily recruited jihadist fighters for its mission to establish an Islamic empire spanning Europe, Asia and the Middle East. It has accumulated wealth by kidnapping for ransom and selling crude oil in the black market, creating a new terrorist threat to Europe and North America.

Obama was forced to rebalance his election pledge between the will of the U.S. public and national security when deciding to go back on his original stance. After all, the United States cannot bear another deadly terrorist attack. Obama might also take this as an opportunity to set the record straight with those who accuse him of excessive weakness in foreign policy.

Although Taiwan seems to be far removed from this war against terrorism, in fact it must make advance preparation. First, the ISIS challenge and the gradual Russian encroachment into Ukraine greatly affect how much focus Washington will place on different areas throughout the region as part of its pivot to Asia-Pacific. On top of that, Washington faces in Asia continued provocations

from North Korea and a relationship with China that oscillates between competition and cooperation. In the next U.S. presidential election the Democrats and the Republicans are bound to fiercely debate and even adjust their respective foreign policy platforms. This will affect bilateral relations between Taiwan and the United States as well as cross-strait relations and even Taiwan's presidential election in 2016. Furthermore, the ISIS effect is already spreading to minority Muslim terrorist organizations in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Against this backdrop, Taiwan cannot remain on the sidelines. President Ma Ying-jeou should emulate the former Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration, which supported then President George W. Bush's global war on terror, by proactively offering initiatives to assist the U.S. anti-terror campaigns. **BT**

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