Insight

What You Need to Know About the "Mother of All Bombs"

RACHEL HOFF | APRIL 14, 2017

While the U.S. military's use of the "Mother of All Bombs" in Afghanistan captured headlines, another development went largely unnoticed. Just 24 hours before a plane dropped the ordinance, the White House announced a new Afghanistan strategy review.

There is still some uncertainty surrounding the largest non-nuclear bomb ever used in combat, officially named the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB). It is initially unclear who authorized the bombing. Was it the President himself or the American military commander in Afghanistan? It is also unclear if the use of the bomb was a one-off tactical strike or the beginning of a new strategy in the 15-year-long war in Afghanistan. Some have even speculated about the timing, given the killing of a U.S. Army Green Beret soldier in the same province only days prior.

However, a few things are clear. First, the target of the bomb was ISIS. More specifically, ISIS-Khorasan, also known as ISIS-K, the branch of the terrorist organization that is active in Afghanistan. As U.S. offensive operations against the terrorist group have intensified, ISIS-K has relied on a complex of underground bunkers and tunnels for defense and as its base of operations in the region. The MOAB explodes in the air above the target, producing an "overblast" that is particularly effective in penetrating subterranean targets like this. By creating something similar to an earthquake upon detonation, the bomb can cause the bunkers and tunnels to collapse or cave in on themselves.

At 21,600 pounds and with a force of 11 tons of TNT, the MOAB is the largest conventional bomb the United States has ever dropped. The GPS guidance system provides the ordinance an accuracy of within 8 meters of its intended target.

Initial reports indicate that 36 ISIS fighters were killed in the bombing, which struck a remote area of Afghanistan near the border with Pakistan. The U.S. military announced it

took “every precaution” to avoid civilian casualties, and Afghan officials have reported there were none.

The U.S. military developed the MOAB in the lead up to the Iraq war, predominantly to put deterrent pressure on Saddam Hussein. The first test of the bomb on a military base in Florida was on March 11, 2003, just over a week before the invasion of Iraq. One month later, when the MOAB was deployed, Iraqi forces had largely been militarily defeated, and the bomb was never used. Fourteen years later, the bombing in Afghanistan marks the first time the MOAB was ever used in combat.

Despite remaining uncertainty about several key details, this first battlefield use of the MOAB seems to confirm some important assumptions about President Trump’s emerging foreign policy doctrine. First, ISIS is and will continue to be a top priority for the administration—even amidst a number of global threats and challenges sometimes competing for attention, such as North Korea’s nuclear program, the Assad regime’s genocide in Syria, and tense relations with Russia. Second, President Trump may be delivering on his promise to give military commanders more latitude on the battlefield. When asked about the MOAB bombing, President Trump said, “What I do is authorize my military. We have the greatest military in the world and they’ve done a job as usual. We have given them total authorization and that’s what they’re doing and, frankly, that’s why they’ve been so successful lately.” The Obama Administration came under significant criticism for micromanaging military strategy from the White House—even from the secretaries of defense that served in that administration.

In the coming days and weeks, a number of indicators should emerge and provide some clarity on the remaining questions about whether this was a singular event or part of a broader shift in strategy for the war in Afghanistan and the fight against ISIS more broadly. Does the counter-ISIS campaign ramp up in Afghanistan, and what does this mean for the fight against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the country? How does this affect U.S. efforts against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, where there are also questions about the degree to which recent bombings are part of a broader strategy? What will be the result of the administration’s new Afghanistan strategy review? And, more importantly, does President Trump heed the advice of his military commanders? Will the administration deliver the resources military leaders deem necessary to achieve victory?