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NATO's counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan: Are classical doctrines suitable for alliances?

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The focus of this article is on one overall question: can an alliance conduct a classical counterinsurgency campaign in the absence of clear leadership? The article will reveal the painful internal problems that NATO and its member states have faced in their current mission to Afghanistan. Our main argument is that, in the absence of unambiguous leadership, conducting traditional counterinsurgency by alliance is intrinsically problematic. Without a clearly discernible leading nation, a collective actor seeking to employ a classical counterinsurgency recipe is destined to be faced with all sorts of collective action problems including free-riding, inconsistent threat perceptions, and difficulties of coordination. Eight years after the toppling of the Taliban regime, the insurgency in Afghanistan seems stronger than ever, while at the same time public support for the campaign is steadily eroding in several western capitals. To be sure, prevailing against a weak but determined irregular opponent in an ill-defined conflict is no easy feat for any actor. The NATO-led campaign has shown that there is a clear lack of unity within the mission and that the only solution to the challenge seems to be the emerging US takeover that is currently underway.

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