

Notice pdf - Staying the unfavorable course

Type de contenu : Texte

Type de médiation : sans médiation

Type de support : Volume

Titre(s) : Staying the unfavorable course : national security Council decisionmaking and the inertia of U.S. Afghanistan policy, 2001-2016 / Matthew Sargent, Jason H. Campbell, Alexandra T. Evans,... [et al.]

Auteur(s) : Sargent, Matthew (19..-....)

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Autre(s) responsabilité(s) : International security and defense policy Center - Éditeur scientifique
Rand corporation - Éditeur scientifique

Publication : Santa Monica (Calif.) : Rand

Description matérielle : 1 vol. (XVII-160 p.) : ill., graph. ; 23 cm

Collection : Research report RR-A808-1

ISBN : 1-977410-44-8

978-1-977410-44-3

EAN : 9781977410443 br.

Appartient à la collection : Research report RR-A808-1

Autre variante du titre : [National Security Council Decisionmaking and the Inertia of U.S. Afghanistan Policy, 2001-2016.]

Classification décimale Dewey : 958.104 7

Note sur la description bibliographique : Consultable à l'adresse

Note sur la responsabilité : Autres contributeurs : Caitlin McCulloch, Jordan R. Reimer, Richard S.

Girven (coauteurs)

Note sur les bibliographies et les index : Bibliogr. p. 143-160

Note sur le contenu : Chapter One: Introduction Chapter Two: The U.S. War in Afghanistan, 2001-2016: A Brief Overview Chapter Three: The Memory of 9/11 and the Psychology of Decisionmaking in Afghanistan Chapter Four: Bureaucratic Dynamics and the Structure of the Policy Process Chapter Five: Civil-Military Relations Chapter Six: The Role of the Intelligence Community in the Policy Process Chapter Seven: Conclusions

Résumé ou extrait : From 2001 to 2021, the United States pursued an unchanging policy objective in Afghanistan: to prevent a terrorist group from using the country as a safe haven in which to plan or launch an attack on the United States. However, despite deteriorating conditions and no apparent hope of military victory, the U.S. goal remained constant even as successive leaders experimented with different strategies to achieve it. The authors examined the reasons behind this policy inertia through interviews with the senior leaders involved in the policy deliberations between 2001 and 2016. They interviewed the decisionmakers involved in high-level discussions and policy formulation to establish the institutional, informational, and interpersonal dynamics that informed major decisions; capture common interpretations and assumptions; and reconstruct how the deliberative process functioned in practice. As this analysis details, decisions for how to navigate de-escalation from a conflict under conditions short of victory are tremendously difficult, both practically and politically. With no clear definition of success, bureaucratic inertia took hold, extending the conflict and enabling focus on mechanical details of its execution rather than its ultimate intent. The dynamics of the policy process further prevented dramatic policy change. Psychological factors promoted risk aversion and a continued escalation of commitment, even when the mission itself became poorly aligned with national priorities. Additionally, frictions between civilian and military leaders and with the Intelligence Community further prevented fundamental reassessments of the mission.

Sujet - Nom commun : Sécurité nationale -- États-Unis

Terrorisme -- Lutte contre -- États-Unis

Relations pouvoir civil-pouvoir militaire -- États-Unis

Politique militaire -- Prise de décision

Politique militaire -- Prise de décision -- États-Unis

Sujet - Nom géographique : Afghanistan -- 2001-.... (Guerre d'Afghanistan) -- Participation américaine

Adresse électronique et mode d'accès : <https://doi.org/10.7249/RRA808-1>