

Staying the unfavorable course

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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.

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