



under discussion

“We Need to Stop Looking at Things Solely from a European Perspective”

On “Value-driven Pragmatism” in Foreign Policy and the Work of Political Foundations

An Interview with Caroline Kanter

Being pragmatic is not the same as being arbitrary or betraying your values – in fact, it is an imperative for German and European foreign policy, says Caroline Kanter, new Deputy Head of the European and International Cooperation Department at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, in an interview with International Reports. She explains why this applies equally to the work done by the foundation abroad.

International Reports (IR): Ms Kanter, the term “systemic conflict” frequently crops up in the debate on foreign policy here in Germany. According to this narrative, we are witnessing a stand-off between liberal democracies and authoritarian rulers as they wrestle over the future structure of the international order. The idea is that the world is caught up in a conflict of values. Yet as frequently becomes apparent in this issue of International Reports, many non-Western states do not see a systemic conflict, nor do they feel that they have to position themselves. What is your view: is there a systemic conflict or not?

Caroline Kanter: If we look at the Western states – first and foremost the United States – on the one hand and China on the other, since these two are generally regarded as the main rivals, we can see that this is certainly about competing systems and world views. So to some extent the debate does revolve around the antithesis between freedom and authoritarianism. If we look at the current global political constellation, however, this antithesis is not the only key factor. On the one hand, it is indeed a more complex phenomenon that goes beyond a “great power conflict”. On the other hand, in addition to the starkly contrasting political and social systems, it also involves a clash between interests that are simply very distinct and sometimes contradictory. An entirely different question – but perhaps one that is crucial here – is, in my view, the position adopted by the numerous states that are not among the main players and how these other states actually behave.

IR: Looking at the articles in this issue, there can be little doubt, as already mentioned, that the notion of a “systemic conflict” is simply not shared by a large number of countries. What conclusions can we draw from this in terms of German foreign policy?

Kanter: You’re absolutely right: in some cases, the countries concerned don’t see a systemic conflict, while in others they may see the conflict but are unwilling to get involved in it and deliberately avoid taking sides. So there are essentially two things we need here. Firstly, we have to define the following for ourselves: what are our values and what are our interests? And in view of this, which countries can we cooperate with more closely in the future? What resources do we want to deploy and to what extent are we an attractive partner for these countries?

In this connection, it is impossible to ignore the complex and sometimes contradictory relationship between freedom, stability and security in terms of our foreign policy focus. This is something we have to face up to as we weigh up how far we are willing to go in advocating these values and interests.

In my discussions with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's international partners, I keep noticing that many countries – in Europe and far beyond – expect Germany to play a more active role at the international level. We haven't done enough to live up to this expectation in the past. We now need to look at this more closely so as to establish where we can pursue partnerships more intensely with countries that share our interest in a common future based on an international set of rules. This is not just a question of being more active, however: we have to proceed more strategically, too. The focus in the past was on aspects of economic and trade policy. Since the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, if not before, it has become clear that we need to be more strategic and take geopolitical factors into account in our foreign and security policy. The recently published National Security Strategy addresses this necessity. Nevertheless, in the medium term, we will be judged by the concrete measures we take and the results they produce.

IR: So we firstly have to be clear about what we want. And secondly?

Kanter: Secondly, as Germans and Europeans, we simply have to accept the fact that many states around the world gear their position very pragmatically towards their own interests. We must bear in mind, for example, that while we tend to regard the war of aggression against Ukraine as a watershed moment – a so-called *Zeitenwende*, or “turning point” in history – in other parts of the world, especially in the Global South, it is seen as a geographically distant conflict, even though the consequences of this war are felt globally. We have to acknowledge that some of these states don't want to bow to the pressure of having to choose one side or the other but prefer to pursue their own genuine interests in the regional and global context.

This “non-alignment” is something we have to acknowledge. We can't divide the world into two camps against the will of other countries and impose our view on them. Instead, we need to stop looking at things solely from a German and European perspective for once and develop an awareness and an understanding of other countries' interests, points of view and constraints. I'm thinking here of India, for example, which has maintained close military relations with Russia for years and where Russian weapons account for by far the largest share of the military arsenal. So if we call on India to withdraw from this cooperation, we have to come up with alternatives. What we have to do is compare these states' expectations with our own positions and identify the points where it is possible to pursue common interests and define common strategic goals.

IR: In other words, you're appealing for more pragmatism. Does this leave room for our much-cited values?

Kanter: Of course, we have values, and we are guided by these values – they underpin our sense of identity and our political actions. Incidentally, this is what sets us apart from some of the other players in international politics. But it's important for us to consider on a case-by-case basis what weight we want to attach to these values in our relations with a particular state. And also, how we want to advocate these values and how strongly. You might call this "value-driven pragmatism". Being pragmatic is not the same as being arbitrary: it means you have a certain aim or a certain value, but you need to ask yourself in each situation whether a particular action or statement will actually help you get closer to achieving this goal or value, or whether it is simply self-affirming and ultimately counter-productive in terms of the practical outcome. We should therefore focus much more on achieving the goal and not merely on proclaiming our commitment to this goal.

What is more, it can't hurt to demonstrate a little humility: when it comes to foreign policy action, we should ask ourselves from time to time whether we ourselves are always able to meet at home the demands and standards we propagate abroad. I also think it is up to us, as part of the public debate, to point out certain dilemmas in foreign and security policy, to explain them and hence to meet people here on their own terms and raise their awareness.

IR: More generally, the question is whether or not we as Europeans are actually still in a position to dictate our conditions and standards at all.

Kanter: The answer to that is no. Today, countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia usually have a number of options to choose from: they aren't dependent on Western partners, so they are not queuing up to cooperate with us. Self-confident and guided by their interests, these countries weigh up which partnerships might benefit them most, and they look closely at the terms and conditions brought up by a potential partner. Take the example of South America. For decades, the EU has been working on an association agreement with the Mercosur trade alliance. We essentially have a fully negotiated text, but some European states are focusing too much on their own agricultural interests and environmental standards, and in doing so they are jeopardising ratification of the agreement. Here, a pragmatic attitude would be helpful that takes greater account of the overall geopolitical context. Our approach to date risks making the Mercosur countries turn away from us and give preference to other countries instead. If this happens, we won't get any closer to meeting our standards: we'll simply lose influence. So we have to be aware of the risk of failing to act, too. We shouldn't be too hesitant and allow too much time to pass: other competitors – attractive potential partners for the Latin American states – are waiting in the wings.



Wrong priorities: If the EU and its member states continue to delay partnerships for domestic political reasons, as is happening with the association agreement with South American Mercosur, which has been under negotiation for almost 25 years, new spaces will keep opening up for Beijing and Moscow. [Photo: © Arne Dedert, dpa, picture alliance.](#)

IR: But when it gets down to the concrete details, pragmatism in foreign policy means not only giving up on maximum demands in terms of environmental standards but also engaging with autocrats. This quickly attracts criticism. For example, the German government's ongoing efforts to obtain natural gas supplies from the Gulf since last year have led some people to say that Germany has learned nothing from what happened with Russia and is now simply looking to purchase energy from different autocrats. Does this argument hold water?

Kanter: That doesn't tell the whole story in my view. It's important for

us not to become unilaterally dependent on another state again, particularly not on an authoritarian one. The acid test here will be our relationship with China. All in all, I'm in favour of a pragmatic and nuanced consideration of each individual case. We have to be honest here: when it comes to our foreign relations, not all autocrats are the same. Russia's war of aggression violates Ukraine's sovereignty, so the current Russian regime simply can't be a partner for us. As we cast around for new partnerships globally or seek to strengthen existing ones, we should be guided by the question of whether we can pursue an international rules-based order together

that is accepted and embraced in practice by the respective actors. A nuanced approach when assessing partners should also take into account the regional role and global significance of the country in question. Another relevant question is that of political stability.

We need to be prudent and pragmatic rather than Eurocentric in our assessments and expectations, as illustrated by developments in North Africa, for example. The hopes we Europeans placed in the “Arab Spring” were not fulfilled. After a little more than ten years, we have to conclude that democracy has not taken hold and that in some cases we’re dealing with autocracies. But here, too, I would advise against closing the door completely. Instead, we should weigh up how to deal with each state in the future. After all, the developments in these countries have a direct and indirect impact on Europe, and there are issues we should be working on together. Here I’m thinking of the energy transition in particular, but there are obviously the challenges of dealing with migration, too.

IR: So you don't think much of the idea that Europe should withdraw into itself economically as far as possible, at most maintaining key trade relations with like-minded democratic states – in other words, pursue a policy of “friendshoring”?

Kanter: I would expressly warn against such ideas, since they ultimately amount to a new form of protectionism. On the contrary, we should be pushing for new free trade agreements – and not only with the Mercosur states I mentioned a moment ago. The conclusion to draw from our experience with Russia should not be self-sufficiency but diversification – in other words broadly based trade relations so as to avoid dependence on individual actors. The challenge here will be how to maintain our values while operating in contexts that are complex but strategically important to us. If we look at the mining of critical resources, for example, it becomes clear that we also need to think about linking trade and development policy more closely than in the past.

IR: Many of the issues and dilemmas we've discussed here also apply to the international cooperation work pursued by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. We have international offices in more than 80 countries on all continents and operate in well over 100 countries. The guiding principle of the foundation is “shaping democracy together”. But if we look at the relevant democracy indices, we soon see that this is not fully possible in all of these countries in the way we'd ideally like. And things are not necessarily getting any better either, the catchword here being “shrinking spaces”. What can we do about this?

Kanter: It’s true that spaces of pluralism are closing – or at least becoming narrower. Some of the problems we’ve just discussed with regard to official German and European foreign policy are also relevant to the work done by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung abroad. And I believe the processes we engage in when it comes to weighing up solutions, and the answers to these problems should be similar to those we just talked about.

Let's take the issue of values, for example. All the partners we work with internationally know what we stand for and what we're aiming to achieve. We're not politically neutral and we stand by that. We're a German political foundation that follows fundamental Christian Democratic convictions. In concrete terms, this means that we attach key importance to the dignity of the individual, we stand up for democracy, the rule of law and the social market economy, and European integration and transatlantic relations are of particular concern to us. These are the values that guide us and provide us with orientation in our concrete project work on the different continents. Nonetheless: for us, too, having values and goals is not the same as showcasing them in every situation and in every relationship. It's a weighing-up process that involves defining what is opportune in which setting and at what point in time. This has a lot to do with respectful communication, too, and not least with credibility. Are we going to criticise states in public discourse? Do we presume to regard our view as the ultimate standard? Or do we seek to engage in dialogue? The public stage is not always the appropriate setting: it is often used to address a domestic audience and not primarily the society of the country concerned.

And of course, we can still be successful in pursuing our goals through concrete projects without having to attach labels that might cause friction in other cultures, even though such labels might be popular in Germany. Here I'm thinking of the area of political participation: for decades now, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has been committed to strengthening political participation among women and young politicians worldwide, and we implement educational measures to promote these social groups in political office. This is something we need to continue to do in a pragmatic way without giving it a new label. This is how we gain support from our local partners.

IR: So you think our, too, work needs to be based on “value-driven pragmatism”?

Kanter: You could certainly call it that. We'll repeatedly be faced

with the decision of how to deal with the shrinking spaces you just mentioned: do we make the most of the space we have left, or do we withdraw from a country where we don't have – or no longer have – the space we would like? This brings me back once again to a principle I mentioned at the beginning: we have to focus on pragmatic, case-by-case decisions. For us at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, too, one important issue is what relevance a particular country has within its region, but also in the global context. There may be cases – and there actually have been in the past – where we come to the conclusion that involvement in the country concerned is no longer worthwhile because our room for manoeuvre has become too narrow and cooperation with our partners in civil society or in the political domain in the respective countries is no longer possible. But there are sometimes cases in which the benefits of our presence outweigh any limitations we may face on the ground.



Are all autocracies the same? Not being democrats is what the Emir of Qatar and the Russian President have in common. But when it comes to the question of whether they can be foreign policy partners for Germany and Europe, other criteria must also be taken into consideration. [Photo: © Vyacheslav Prokofyev, AP, picture alliance.](#)

IR: Can you give us an example of such benefits?

Kanter: In some cases, it can be of enormous value just to be able to

observe developments on the ground in a particular country and make our analyses available to the public and decision-makers in Germany. We talked earlier about the fact that as Germans and Europeans we can't simply impose our views and values on other countries but must pragmatically respond to their interests and perspectives – but this means we need to have a realistic picture of what those are. I think we can make a very significant contribution here based on the country-specific expertise that we generate through our dense network of offices.

We sometimes tend to be guided more by wishful thinking than by the political realities on the ground, which means we're surprised when things don't develop the way we expected or would like. And by the way, this applies not only to developments on other continents but in the European context too, where we're sometimes surprised at the electoral choices people make. We aim to use our local presence to help build a sound basis for making assessments. This presence, especially through local partners, enables us to gain insights at an early stage so that we can identify changes and trends.

IR: One obvious objection would be that Germany already has at least as dense a network of official government offices abroad, namely its embassies and consulates.

Kanter: I think their work and that of the political foundations complement each other in some respects, which also means that we as a foundation can do things the diplomatic missions sometimes can't. The diplomatic corps primarily maintains relations with the government of the host country – that's what it's supposed to do. So here there is no option of “choosing” who you engage with.

As a political foundation, we enter into partnerships in countries that respect our values and share our interests. Our partners are often political parties – whether in government or in opposition. On the one hand, this means that we may have already been working with certain actors for many years before they move into decision-making positions, as a result of which we have direct access and deeper bonds of trust. Secondly, in my opinion, that often enables us to detect political developments in our host countries at a particularly early stage.

What is more, our target groups and priorities differ from those of the diplomatic actors: we maintain close relations with civil society organisations and with academic institutions and think tanks. This enables us to perform a kind of “gauging and explaining” function: we can tap into issues that are relevant in other regions of the world early on and introduce them in the German and European debate. In this connection, I'm particularly thinking of the regional programmes we launched several years ago that are dedicated to the topic of climate and energy security. Here, we succeeded at an early stage in focusing more on the Arctic – which is relevant both geostrategically and from the point of view of security and resources – and in highlighting the positions of the Arctic states. Another example is the field of artificial intelligence: our presence in Asia is crucial if we want to identify trends, new policy approaches and experiences and feed these into the European debate. In my view, our work abroad offers enormous added value through this transfer of knowledge and the possibility of feeding information back to Germany and Europe.

IR: So if in doubt, it's better to leave a door open?

Kanter: Absolutely. We've talked a lot about shrinking spaces – and unfortunately, we have to acknowledge realistically that this phenomenon is growing rather than declining worldwide. But there are positive developments where new spaces are opening up, too, and we can identify these spaces early on due to our presence on the ground, enabling us to actively promote closer relations.

And we shouldn't forget the role as a “door-opener” when it comes to intensifying existing partnerships. In recent years, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has, in my view, taken a good strategic look at where we can gain important points of access, partnerships and sources of information through new locations so as to intensify relations in like-minded nations, thus allowing us to advance a shared commitment to a rules-based international order. Here I'm thinking of our new offices in Canada, Australia and in Stockholm for the Nordic countries – all democratic partner countries that are closely linked to us.

But there's also our office in Baghdad, which enables us to be very close to the developments in this important country and maintain direct dialogue with the actors on the ground. We also want to send a signal that we're interested in developments there and that there shouldn't be a vacuum that is filled by others. After all, that is a reality and to some extent a failure on our part: in both Africa and Latin America, we've allowed free spaces to emerge that are now occupied by autocratic actors – regional and global forces. I think that, based on strategic decisions and partnership-oriented action, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has positioned itself well in recent years to be able to tackle global challenges with the support of partners worldwide.

The interview was conducted by Sören Soika and Fabian Wagener – translated from German.

Caroline Kanter has been Deputy Head of the European and International Cooperation Department of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung since April 2023. Her previous work for the foundation included positions as Head of the offices in Rome and in Paris.