

under discussion

“We have our seismographs all around the world.”

An Interview with Caroline Kanter

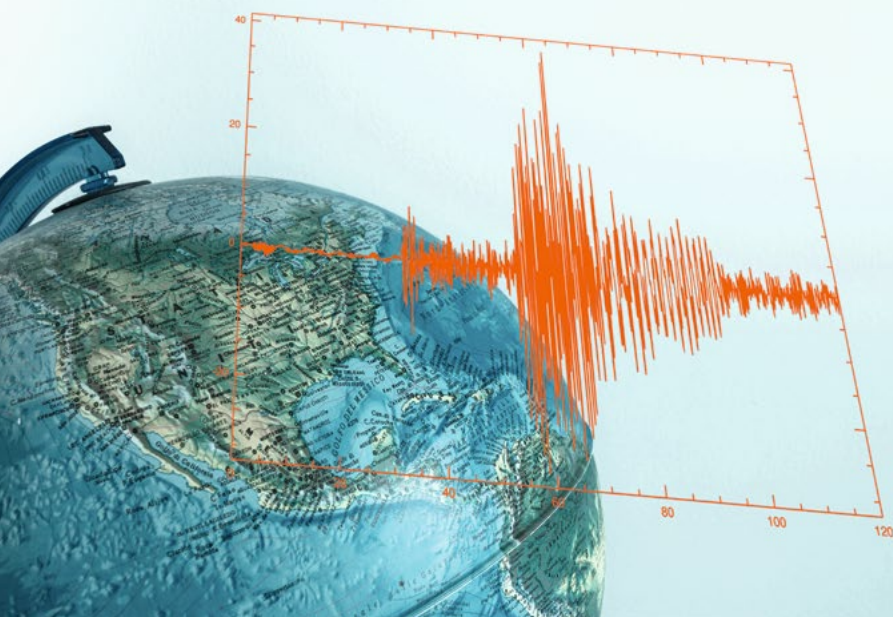


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For this edition of *International Reports*, we spoke with Caroline Kanter about transatlantic challenges, European homework, and the international work of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. We look into why we should not break off dialogue with the US, the significance of the issue of EU enlargement, and why the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung can help to identify global developments that will ultimately affect us in Germany at an early stage.



Caroline Kanter has been Head of the European and International Cooperation Division since February 2026, after holding the position of Deputy Head of this division since 2023. Previously, she headed the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung country offices in Paris and Rome.

International Reports (IR): Ms Kanter, you became Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's European and International Cooperation Division in February, so you are now also the new editor of International Reports. What do you see as the defining quality of our magazine, and what matters most to you in your new role?

Caroline Kanter: *International Reports* is a brand in its own right. If a publication endures for more than 42 years, that's not a coincidence. For me, one key reason is the high professional and qualitative standards the magazine sets for itself – and consistently meets. It has also repeatedly evolved in terms of formats in order to reach new audiences. I'm thinking of the English-language edition, the podcast in German and English, and the magazine's presence on social media, for example. That's certainly an area where we'll need to keep asking how we can present the high-quality content we have in ways that resonate with contemporary audiences. I believe it is also important for us to continue to reflect carefully on the niche we want *International Reports* to occupy in the foreign policy debate. What sets us apart from other actors and products that are contributing to that debate?

IR: What do you have in mind?

Kanter: There are several points to consider. First of all, what sets us apart from other institutions is that we don't view the world neutrally. We have a standpoint – a European, German, and Christian democratic one. And we don't simply collect facts – because artificial intelligence is faster at that, anyway. What we do is analyse and provide context.

No one picks up *International Reports* to find out who won the presidential election in Argentina. But when it comes to assessing what a president such as Javier Milei means for the country and what conclusions we in Europe should draw, that's where the analysis provided by our staff on the ground comes into play.

And like in Buenos Aires, we have a presence at around 100 locations across the globe. That's an invaluable resource – for *International Reports*, too. Being able to report from so many countries on what the situation is actually like on the ground can add real value to the German foreign policy debate – a debate that is sometimes accused (not entirely unfairly) of wishful thinking. This geographical breadth also enables us not only to cover issues that are already high on the political agenda, but additionally to focus deliberately on countries and topics that are still under the radar. I'm thinking about our issue on the Arctic, for example, which appeared almost exactly three years ago.

IR: We published our issue on current US foreign policy roughly three months ago. Since then, a great deal has happened. Not least, the debates around Greenland and the American-Israeli attack on Iran have prompted observers in Europe to seriously question the transatlantic partnership. What do these developments mean for us in Europe and for the foundation's international work?

Kanter: If the issue you mentioned shows us anything, it's that the perception and assessment of the foreign policy being pursued by the US and its president differ considerably in other parts of the world from how they are viewed here. There are some countries that see opportunities for themselves in Donald Trump's policies: Israel and the Gulf states, for example. At the same time, one common denominator in how almost all countries describe their experience with Trump is the unpredictability and the pace – that is, the sheer speed – with which the Trump administration confronts other states. For us here in Europe in particular, we have to acknowledge that transatlantic relations have reached a turning point. In many respects, the US administration – among others – is calling into question the rules-based order that the United States itself helped shape after 1945. That runs counter not only to our interests, but also to our principles.

Regarding the situation in the Middle East and the Israeli–American attack on Iran, I believe there are two points to consider. First, it must be stated that containing



Keeping the dialogue open: Even though the number of disagreements between the United States and Europe has increased significantly in recent times, the United States will remain an indispensable partner in the short and medium term, not least in the field of security policy. Photo: © Zuma Press Wire, Imago.

or eliminating the Iranian threat to Israel – which has been built up over decades – through political and diplomatic means would have been desirable, but proved impossible to realise. Israel’s threat perception, in turn, appears more understandable than ever, particularly against the backdrop of the devastating Hamas attack on 7 October 2023. These dynamics and developments illustrate the high priority of the Middle East for German and European policy, as well as for the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung’s international work in the region. Our commitment to Israel’s right to exist and our support for the Israeli people, especially in times of war, serve as our guiding principles here; our close partnerships with numerous actors in the Middle East are more important than ever. In this context, we are closely monitoring the geostrategic repercussions of the substantial loss of Iran’s military potential and the resulting weakening of the autocratic China–Russia–Iran–North Korea alliance.

IR: Faced with this geopolitical panorama, how should Germany and Europe respond?

Kanter: First, we in Europe must live up to our ambition as a global actor and actively shape the changing international order, its institutions, and its regulatory framework. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen underscored her commitment to this task during the EU Ambassadors’ Conference, demanding that Europe become more independent, resilient, and stronger.

With regard to transatlantic relations, there are two different ways to respond. Some say, “Our counterpart in Washington is uncomfortable, unpredictable, and difficult, so we should now retreat and disengage”. But that approach overlooks a fundamental reality: As Europeans, we’re still dependent on the United States – particularly when it comes to our security. We’re consequently trying to boost our strength significantly in defence matters and investing heavily in rebuilding and expanding our armed forces and capabilities. But in the short to medium term, that reality will remain. So, for the foreseeable future, we have no better option than the kind of partnership currently offered to us by the United States. Alongside expressing criticism where it is warranted, this also means continuing to make constructive offers – ideally coordinated at the European level and backed up by greater capabilities of our own – for renewed cooperation in NATO and in other areas where we share interests.

And in so doing, we should not lose sight of the fact that the United States remains a democratic polity in which diverse views exist, not least on the foreign policy questions shaping the transatlantic debate. This became clear again at the Munich Security Conference in February – at least in tone, and in some cases also substantively. Our foundation maintains channels of communication with this diverse range of actors – within the administration, the opposition, Congress, and at the state level. Incidentally, this is by no means a new development or merely a reaction to Trump. We’ve been operating like this for decades.

One final point on this: We should not allow current political tensions to cause the human and societal bridges across the Atlantic – built over more than half a century – to collapse. In my view, the growing anti-Americanism that can be seen in the German debate is worrying.



IR: If our relationship with the United States is indeed no longer as reliable as in the past, we require new partnerships alongside a renewed transatlantic alliance. Where should Germany and Europe look for these?

Kanter: Broadly speaking, I would distinguish between two categories: partners we share values with, and partners we share interests with. This is not a black-and-white distinction: In practice, the boundaries are fluid. For me, values-based partners are countries with which – despite differences in detail – we share a fundamentally liberal democratic understanding and ideas about the rule of law and human rights. Outside the EU, I’m thinking of countries such as the United Kingdom and Norway, and beyond Europe, of Canada, Australia, and Japan. There are numerous countries in Latin America that fall into this category, as well.

IR: But globally speaking, it’s a rather small club, isn’t it?

Kanter: Indeed. If we limited our partnerships to countries that can be considered “like-minded” in a narrower sense, we’d quickly find ourselves quite isolated. That’s why we also need partners with whom we may not share liberal democratic values but with whom we do share certain interests – possibly economic diversification and our supply of raw materials, but also the question of the rules-based international order. There are a number of small and medium-sized states – including countries that are not democracies – that, like us, have a fundamental interest in ensuring that the law of the strongest does not prevail globally. If we want to leverage such shared interests, we also need to maintain dialogue with countries whose domestic systems do not reflect our principles. This category includes countries such as Egypt, Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan, and also a number of Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam.

IR: That all sounds very logical. And yet it took the EU more than a quarter of a century to conclude an agreement with Mercosur.

Kanter: The European Commission is right to seek a provisional application of the agreement. But the European Parliament’s decision in January to refer the agreement to the ECJ was a major error, albeit only the most visible expression of a broader problem: For a long time, we have invested too little in our partners – not only financially, but also in terms of diplomatic acknowledgement and appreciation. As a result, those partners – including values-based partners – are naturally beginning to look elsewhere because they now have alternatives. If we don’t step up, others will. The pandemic is a case in point: It was not Europe that first supplied vaccines to Latin America, but Russia and China. In some cases, there was a real loss of trust. I don’t think it’s too late to repair these partnerships, but we must act now.

IR: All the more so given that trust and predictability should be especially valued at a time when the United States has become less predictable.

Kanter: Exactly. And despite the reservations I've just mentioned, I believe we Europeans are still comparatively well placed in this respect. We may not always be the fastest, but our partners generally know where they stand with us – and that what we say today will still hold tomorrow. Reliability and predictability are qualities that others value in Europeans.

IR: So, in a harsher international environment, the EU needs partners. But it also needs to gain geopolitical weight itself. Should we view the question of EU enlargement as an instrument that serves this purpose, as well?

Kanter: It is precisely the geopolitical environment that has reopened a window for enlargement. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine not only pushed the accession processes of the Western Balkan states back up the agenda, but also triggered applications from Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia – though in Georgia's case, we would now have to add a large question mark. It seems to me we have tended to focus mainly on the challenges associated with this process. And there's no doubt that these challenges exist and that we have to discuss them openly.

IR: But ...

Kanter: But we must equally discuss the cost of inaction. For example: What will happen if we permanently close the door to the European Union for these states? What I said earlier applies in this context again: These countries have alternatives and in some cases are already making use of them. Actors such as Turkey, Russia, and China have already created facts on the ground in the Western Balkans, particularly with regard to resource extraction. It cannot be in our interest to end up with countries at the heart of Europe that are growing frustrated with the EU and are turning towards other powers instead.

IR: But when we speak of enlargement, we also need to consider the EU's internal condition: It is already struggling with conflicts between existing members and may now have to take on new members, as well.

Kanter: Enlargement must go hand in hand with internal reforms. Nonetheless, we should get used to the idea that this will not be a grand leap, not a sweeping change of the treaties. Instead, we must work to advance the European Union, which has brought us decades of economic prosperity and helped secure peace, below that threshold. As Christian democrats in particular, we should insist on the principle of subsidiarity. And again, I would point to the factor of time and the pace at which conditions and realities are changing. Waiting is a luxury we simply can't afford. We need to move more quickly from problem analysis to action. Beyond that, the internal condition of many member states is also a cause for concern since it weakens Europe globally.

IR: Alongside procedural reforms, would economic competitiveness be another starting point?

Kanter: Yes – and an important one. Without economic competitiveness, we lack weight on the international stage. Even with all the rearmament efforts underway, overwhelming military power alone is not going to turn us into a player that is able to sit at the table in major decisions in the foreseeable future. Germany and the European Union have been sought-after partners worldwide because we are economically strong and attractive, and this continues to be the case. But we’re losing ground. It helps to bear the following in mind: In 2007, before the financial crisis, both the United States and the EU accounted for roughly one-quarter of global economic output in nominal terms. China stood at just 6 per cent at the time. Since then, the US has actually slightly increased its share, while we’ve dropped to 18 per cent, with China now almost level at 17 per cent.

IR: How can this trend be halted?

Kanter: On the one hand, we need a political strategy that sets the framework and clearly defines the areas in which Germany and Europe want to become drivers of innovation again – and one that additionally sets out how the state can support this. On the other hand, we should not abandon our market-oriented approach: Within that framework, we should rely on the innovative strength of our companies. After all, it’s also true that in Europe, we’ve overshot the mark in terms of regulation in recent decades. In my view, this has now been recognised as a problem in a number of governments and within the European Commission itself. This realisation was reflected in the informal competitiveness summit in Belgium in February. Practical consequences must now follow. Again, time will be a key factor.

IR: As we draw this conversation to a close, let’s go back to the international work undertaken by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. Promoting democracy will surely remain a core element of that work. Where do you see our role?

Kanter: Democracy promotion is a very broad concept. Moreover, as a political foundation, we should look closely at where we set our priorities. For me, it’s the parliaments and political parties – supplemented by our rule-of-law and media programmes. Cooperation in this field is our core brand and should remain so. This type of cooperation is not a one-way street, either. It’s important to me that our global partnerships keep us in touch with developments on the ground: How are parties in other countries evolving in terms of organisation, communication, and the use of AI, for example? The ability to feed these insights back into our work so that we can learn from them in Germany is a real strength.

At the same time, we’re seeing democratic space shrinking in many countries. This is something we experience in our own work and in our relationships with local partners. In some of these countries, we’ve been present for six decades, and we stand

by our partners, even in difficult times. Exactly what form this support takes has to be decided on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes, it can be public, but often, it is more effective to act in the background.

IR: And beyond democracy promotion, what else should our international work seek to achieve?

Kanter: I could list a lot of things, but allow me to focus on a few key points. Let me return to the topic of global partnerships we discussed earlier. As the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, we can rightly say that we invest in partnerships around the world – even counter-cyclically, if I may put it that way. We have always maintained ties in Latin America, even in phases during which the region was not a priority for German policy. For many decades, we’ve also paid close attention to developments in Southeast Asia, and we currently run offices in eight of the eleven ASEAN states. We view this as an asset for German foreign policy as a whole, too.



In the European Union’s waiting room: The accession process of many Western Balkan states has already been dragging on for many years. Alongside the necessary discussion about the challenges of enlargement, we should also ask what might happen if these countries were to eventually turn away from the EU out of disappointment, says Caroline Kanter. *Photo: © dts Nachrichtenagentur, Imago.*

Our country offices additionally enable us to identify developments in different regions at an early stage, to combine these observations into an overall picture in Berlin, and to derive conclusions and recommendations for action. Bringing together different theatres and learning from conflicts across regions is crucial in my view. We shouldn't look at crises, developments, and trends in isolation, but rather consider what conclusions can be drawn from one scenario to help confront another.

IR: Can you give us an example?

Kanter: On the subject of maritime security, for instance, it makes sense to take a combined look at China's grey-zone tactics in the South China Sea, at Russian activities in the Black Sea and the Baltic, and at the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. Meanwhile, in the area of development cooperation, we've been observing for years how other actors use this instrument to achieve geopolitical gains in different regions of the world. Just think of the Chinese infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. Then, there is the soft power that Turkey is using to gain influence. By contrast, Germany and Europe have not yet deployed these instruments strategically enough. We compiled these observations last year, developed recommendations, and fed them into the political process.

In short, we have our seismographs all around the world. When one of them registers a tremor, it gives us the chance to prepare for developments. If several seismographs register tremors simultaneously, we know that something larger may be coming our way. This is an asset we will continue to make use of.

*This interview was conducted by Magdalena Falkner and Sören Soika.
– translated from German –*