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Operational Mechanism and Development Trend of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (Postprint)

Authors: Duan Meizhen

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Strengthening the construction and development of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics constitutes an important component of enhancing our country's soft power and serving national decision-making. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the operational mechanisms and development trends of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, aiming to offer references and insights for the construction and development of think tanks in our country. [Method/Process] Employing literature research and web-based investigation methods, this study summarizes the development history, value concepts, and operational mechanisms of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Simultaneously, based on internationally authoritative global think tank ranking reports, it analyzes the Foundation's focus areas and development trends. [Results/Conclusion] As the best think tank affiliated with a political party for consecutive years, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's ability to provide solid support for German politics and party development is inseparable from its unique organizational structure, operational mechanisms, and development philosophy.

Full Text

Preamble

The Operational Mechanism and Developmental Stance of Konrad Adenauer Foundation

Duan Meizhen^{1,2}

Abstract

[Purpose/significance] The construction and development of new think tanks with Chinese characteristics constitutes a vital component of strengthening China's soft power and serving national decision-making. This paper provides

an in-depth analysis of the operational mechanism and developmental trajectory of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, offering valuable references for the development of think tanks in China. [Method/process] Employing literature review and web-based research methods, this study systematically examines the foundation's historical evolution, value concepts, and operational mechanisms. Concurrently, based on authoritative global think tank ranking reports, it analyzes the foundation's priority areas and developmental trends. [Result/conclusion] As the best think tank affiliated with a political party for consecutive years, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's ability to provide solid support for German political and party development is inseparable from its unique organizational structure, operational mechanisms, and developmental philosophy.

Keywords: Konrad Adenauer Foundation; think tank; development history; operational mechanism; value governance model

1 Research Background

Following the 2015 issuance of the *Opinion on Strengthening the Construction of New Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics* by the central government, China has entered a new developmental phase for its think tank sector, demonstrating promising momentum. However, numerous challenges persist, such as maintaining balance and tension between think tank governance systems and preserving institutional independence, and maximizing the role of think tanks in China's political, economic, diplomatic, and social development. These issues, which concern the direction and quality of think tank construction in China, require urgent resolution. As the proverb goes, "stones from other hills may serve to polish jade." During this initial stage of think tank development, China must learn from the advanced developmental concepts and management practices of high-end foreign think tanks to better promote its own think tank construction and development.

Germany ranks among the earliest nations to establish think tanks. Since the 19th century, after successive devastating blows to democratic politics, the escalating dictatorship of fascist regimes, and the catastrophic devastation of World War II, Germany recognized the critical importance of broad-based democratic political education and political participation for its modern democratic institutional construction. Consequently, six political foundations were established in succession: the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS), the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, the Hanns Seidel Foundation, the Heinrich Böll Foundation, and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. Their purpose was to advance the smooth implementation of democratic politics. In practice, German political foundations, as independent social organizations with close government ties and affinities to political parties, have indeed played significant roles in German political and foreign policy decision-making by virtue of their unique identities and roles. Therefore, studying the operational models and developmental status of German political foundations holds positive reference value for think tank construction in China, particularly for think tanks serving

major national strategic decision-making.

This paper selects the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (hereinafter referred to as “the Foundation”)—one of the two major political foundations among Germany’s six—as the research subject. Through desktop research, primarily based on the *2017 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* released by the University of Pennsylvania in January 2018 and the Foundation’s annual reports, this study systematically examines its current developmental status and trajectory, aiming to stimulate further discussion and provide reference information for the construction of new think tanks with Chinese characteristics.

2.1 Development History

Established in 1964 with headquarters in Berlin and St. Augustin near Bonn, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation serves as the think tank of Germany’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Its predecessor was the “Society for Christian Democratic Education” created by the CDU, which was renamed in 1964 after Konrad Adenauer, the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (1949-1963). Based on milestone events in the Foundation’s development, its history can be divided into four stages: origin, establishment, growth, and sustained development.

Origin Stage (1952-1956): This phase represents the initial conceptualization and formation of the institutional prototype. Inspired by Christian democratic values, CDU politicians recognized the necessity of establishing a systematic civic education program in 1952. Between 1953 and 1955, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer discussed with CDU alliance executives the creation of an education and training center. In December 1955, the Society for Christian Democratic Education was established in Bonn, followed by the establishment of an educational institution at the Eichholz Estate to organize seminars. Thus, the prototype of the Adenauer Foundation emerged, establishing its close relationship with the CDU.

Establishment Stage (1957-1964): This phase spans from the operational launch of the institutional prototype to its official renaming as the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. After its establishment, the Society for Christian Democratic Education elected Bruno Heck as its first chairman. In April 1958, the society was renamed the Eichholz Political Academy. Beginning in 1960, while maintaining its independence, the academy cooperated closely with CDU headquarters on educational activities and programs addressing European unification. In 1962, the Institute for International Solidarity (IIS) was established. In 1963, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer officially announced the expansion of the Eichholz Political Academy, which was renamed the Konrad Adenauer Foundation the following year.

Growth Stage (1965-2003): This phase involved strengthening and perfecting the organizational structure and expanding business operations following the official renaming. Institutionally, the Foundation successively established

student training programs, a social science research institute, regional political education and research institutions, the Archive for Christian Democratic Policy, an education academy, an international cooperation department, and a political consulting department. Through continuous reform and restructuring, it eventually formed an institutional deployment comprising six major departments, two educational centers, one international conference center, and sixty-six training centers. Geographically, the Foundation established offices in numerous countries and regions worldwide, including South America, Central America, Africa, Western Europe, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and Asia, with each office focusing on distinct research priorities. Consequently, the Foundation's institutional setup stabilized and matured, its geographical layout became globalized and networked, and its research themes and content diversified.

Sustained Development Stage (2004–Present): After more than half a century of development, the Adenauer Foundation has become a renowned think tank in Germany, Europe, and globally. In 2010, the Foundation received the prestigious “berufundfamilie” certification for its effective measures in promoting work-life balance, becoming the first German political foundation to be awarded this certificate.

2.2 Value Concepts

In Germany, political foundations originate from the political needs of political parties, and the two maintain close kinship relationships. Political foundations share common value concepts with their affiliated parties and use these fundamental values as action guidelines in their work. Consequently, the Adenauer Foundation's values and thinking regarding political philosophy and social governance align with those of the CDU. Guided by the ideological convictions of Konrad Adenauer, the CDU's first chairman, the Foundation is committed to promoting the future development of the Federal Republic of Germany and insists on serving the public interest in a non-profit manner. The Foundation prioritizes non-political diplomacy, striving to consolidate European democracy and unity through civic education programs, improve transatlantic relations, and deepen development cooperation, thereby promoting freedom, harmony, and fairness globally. As a think tank and consulting institution, the Adenauer Foundation seeks to develop pragmatic, solution-oriented ideas to address current issues in domestic policy, social policy, economic policy, and foreign policy. Furthermore, the Foundation adheres to a people-centered philosophy, organizing over 2,500 conferences and events annually that attract more than 145,000 participants, while also providing scholarship support for young talents both domestically and internationally.

3.1 Management Structure

Among the six major foundations, except for the Naumann Foundation, the Adenauer Foundation, like four others, is a registered association. Therefore, while

their specific organizational structures differ, their management frameworks are consistent.

The Adenauer Foundation is governed by a three-tiered structure comprising the General Assembly, the Board of Directors, and the Board of Trustees. The General Assembly serves as the supreme decision-making body, with membership limited to 55 individuals (52 members since 2015). Its primary responsibilities include: (1) electing the Board of Directors and Board of Trustees, appointing or removing their members; (2) providing guidance to these bodies and establishing the Foundation's work plans and guidelines; (3) reviewing and approving financial reports; and (4) deciding on matters authorized in the Foundation's charter. The General Assembly convenes annually, with special sessions held when necessary. The Board of Directors constitutes the highest leadership body, elected by the General Assembly every two years. It comprises one chairperson, two to three vice-chairpersons, a treasurer, a secretary-general, and up to sixteen additional members (three of whom are designated by the Board itself), currently totaling twenty-three members. The Board handles daily operations and financial management, assuming responsibility for all Foundation affairs not explicitly assigned to the General Assembly or Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees assists and supervises the Foundation's work, providing advice and support to the Board of Directors to facilitate better planning and execution of its duties. At least ten Board members are appointed by the Board of Directors for two-year terms, with the current Board comprising twenty-five members.

3.2 Organizational Structure

A review of the Adenauer Foundation's half-century development reveals that its history is also one of continuous organizational evolution, reflecting adjustments and changes in research fields and business layout. From its initial focus on singular educational work to today's globalized development model, the Foundation has developed comprehensive operational capabilities.

Currently, the Foundation's organizational layout comprises functional departments and business departments under the leadership of three major power bodies. Functional departments include the Personnel Division, Administrative Affairs Division, Finance Division, and Information Center, which support and safeguard research and business implementation. Business departments encompass the European and International Cooperation Department, Politics and Consulting Department, Civic Education Department, Scholarships and Cultural Activities Department, Academy, and the Archive for Christian Democratic Policy (ACDP).

3.2.1 European and International Cooperation Department

External cooperation constitutes a key focus of the Foundation's work. The European and International Cooperation Department is dedicated to promoting the establishment of democratic structures and legal order worldwide, with

all issues related to social development and security policy forming important components of its operations. Its international programs focus on fostering European unity and transatlantic relations, developing democratic political parties, emphasizing social market economy principles, protecting innovation, and promoting development cooperation.

The department's work is conducted through five primary channels: European programs, rule of law initiatives, global media programs, domestic programs, and the Foundation's worldwide offices. European programs, funded by the EU since 1990, concentrate on democracy building, governance, and development cooperation. Rule of law initiatives establish global expert networks through transnational legal projects, facilitating discussion and exchange on topics that cannot be publicly debated at the national level, achieving mutual benefits between Germany and other nations. Global media programs promote media freedom and independence from governmental, legal, and economic constraints to better serve democratic construction and promotion. Domestic programs support the Foundation's external cooperation by providing assistance to international visiting talents and scholarship recipients in Germany.

The Foundation maintains over 100 offices and 200 projects in more than 120 countries worldwide, forming the foundation of its international consulting network. These offices operate around three primary objectives: (1) enhancing policy framework development and problem-solving capabilities based on the Foundation's strategic significance to the country; (2) creating public forums to showcase Germany's political and economic interests; and (3) ensuring the flow of regional political information to Germany to stimulate political discussion and decision-making processes. Specifically, each office has distinct characteristics, tailoring its operations to local conditions.

3.2.2 Politics and Consulting Department

The Politics and Consulting Department serves as the Adenauer Foundation's think tank, comprising six research teams: domestic policy, social policy, economic policy, education and science policy, religious integration and family policy, empirical social research, and digitalization. Its goal is to foster political rethinking. As the Foundation's "thinkers" and "doers," this department conducts fact-finding, manages knowledge transfer, and provides political consulting. It develops fundamental concepts for the Foundation's work, offers concrete solutions to political and social problems, and supplies analytical background information to rationalize political decision-making processes. Its primary focuses are: (1) developing policies beneficial to civic education and political practice; (2) monitoring policy trends and exploring long-term social development; and (3) communicating the Foundation's strategies and policies to political audiences.

3.2.3 Civic Education Department

Civic education represents the core mission of the Adenauer Foundation, with the primary objective of enhancing citizen participation in democratic politics. In addition to offline courses and forums, the Foundation conducts educational activities through an online civic education portal, which has become an important delivery method attracting substantial attention.

3.2.4 Scholarships and Cultural Activities Department

The Adenauer Foundation scholarships reward students and graduates with outstanding academic achievements, political performance, and social responsibility. These scholarships support both German students and foreign students studying in Germany, with the requirement that recipients endorse Christian democratic social and political values.

3.2.5 Academy

The Academy facilitates dialogue among policymakers, business communities, academia, and society, focusing on organizing seminars, conferences, expert roundtables, and exhibitions to discuss current political issues and future-relevant topics. It positions itself as a barometer of German and European social development. The Adenauer Foundation Youth Academy aims to stimulate young people's political interest and foster civic responsibility.

3.2.6 Archive for Christian-Democratic Policy (ACDP)

The Archive for Christian-Democratic Policy comprises five divisions: Historical Archive, Press Archive, Media Archive, Library, and Contemporary History Archive. Its core mission is to collect, catalog, and preserve archival materials related to Christian democracy, making them available to users to promote academic research and publication.

3.3.1 Funding under Legal Framework

German political foundations are established under private law frameworks, providing public interest services that the state cannot offer in an independent, responsible, and open manner. Consequently, they primarily rely on financial support from federal and state governments to sustain operations and activities. According to Germany's public budget legal framework, annual federal payments to political foundations are determined by the Budget Committee of the German Bundestag. When the federal budget is approved by parliament, allocated funds include both "global subsidies" and project funding, distributed on a matrix-consistent basis that appropriately weights each foundation's long-term political impact. This matrix, submitted by political foundations with consent to the Budget Committee, applies to both institutional subsidy distribution and project funding allocation, though additional factors are considered for the latter.

Currently, the federal funding distribution among the six major foundations is approximately: Ebert Foundation receives 31.9%, Adenauer Foundation 28.0%, Naumann and Böll Foundations each 10.4%, Seidel Foundation 9.8%, and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation receives the lowest institutional subsidy at 9.5%. To ensure proper fund utilization, political foundations are subject to audits by the Federal Court of Auditors, state audit courts, and tax authorities.

3.3.2 Foundation' s Funding Source Distribution

The Adenauer Foundation' s funding primarily relies on public funds, participation fees, and other sources including private income (from investments and donations). Specifically, 96.8% of its funding comes from public budgets, 2.7% from membership fees and other income, and 0.5% from private donations. The vast majority of public budget allocations are project funds, accounting for 75.6% of total income. These project funds support activities including international cooperation promotion measures, German undergraduate and graduate scholarship programs, foreign student scholarship programs, and editing of important archival materials.

In addition to project funds, institutional subsidies constitute an important income source, representing 24.4% of the total budget. These subsidies form the foundation of the Foundation' s financial planning, enabling unified planning of human resources and financial needs without which such coordination would be impossible. The Foundation utilizes these "global funds" to support: congresses, conferences, and seminars related to political education; research consultations and documentation on basic rules concerning Christian democratic movements and political activities; publications and exhibitions; staff salaries; expenditures for goods and services; and investments.

During periods of public budget austerity, the importance of private donations increases. The Adenauer Foundation receives three private bequests: the Else Heiliger Fund for cultural activities and artists as stipulated in the will, the Theodor and Elisa Weimar Fund for academic projects per the will, and the Werner Hintzle Fund for regional education.

[Figure 1: see original paper]

4 Latest Developments of the Adenauer Foundation

The *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*, compiled by the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) at the University of Pennsylvania, represents the most authoritative global think tank ranking report, comprehensively and accurately reflecting the development strength of think tanks worldwide. By comparing the reports published in 2017 and 2018, we can reveal the Adenauer Foundation' s developmental trends and changes over the past two years. Additionally, using the Adenauer Foundation as a reference point, Table 3 lists the top three think tanks in each ranking category where the Foundation appears.

As shown in Table 3, the Adenauer Foundation maintained its position in the global top think tank and top non-US think tank rankings over the past two years, while rising in the Western Europe top think tank ranking, indicating continuously strengthening comprehensive capabilities. Regarding top think tanks by research area, the Foundation has not entered the top ranks, with its ranking declining in top foreign policy and international affairs think tanks and top international development think tanks, rising in top defense and national security think tanks, and remaining unchanged in top social policy think tanks. In terms of top think tanks with special achievements, the Foundation was not listed in the best think tank with institutional collaboration (two or more) ranking in 2015, began strengthening institutional collaboration in 2016, and jumped to 15th place in 2017. In both 2016 and 2017, the Foundation ranked first globally in best think tank network and best think tank affiliated with a political party. This powerful networked organizational and operational capacity represents a key factor in achieving the Foundation's goals, as effectively expanding, organizing, and developing think tank networks creates tremendous momentum for its development. Consistently ranking first among think tanks affiliated with political parties demonstrates the Foundation's close relationship with its supported party and its profound influence on party and national political development. Furthermore, its presence in rankings for best managed think tank, best use of social media (social networks), best use of internet, and best use of media indicates that the Foundation places significant emphasis on and achieves effective results in organizational management and social promotion—aligning with its original focus on broad-based democratic political education. Finally, its inclusion in rankings for think tanks with the best external relations/public engagement programs, most influential think tanks on public policy, think tanks with the best policy-oriented research programs, and think tanks with the most innovative policy ideas/proposals demonstrates the Foundation's considerable focus on public and foreign policy research and political democracy construction.

Table 4 further illustrates the Adenauer Foundation's research and development status. The Foundation appears only four times across various top think tank rankings by research area—less than one-third of the total ranking categories—and has never ranked in the top three, indicating that its research capacity and level require continuous improvement. However, in rankings for think tanks with special achievements, the Foundation appears more frequently, with 16.7% of its listed rankings placing in the top three. Combined with Table 3, this reveals that the Adenauer Foundation maintains relatively focused development goals and direction.

Implications for Chinese Think Tanks

Reviewing the Adenauer Foundation's development over the past half-century reveals its transformation from a conceptual framework to an operational institution and finally to a global think tank. Its developmental thinking and philosophy offer important insights and references for think tank construction

and development in China.

- (1) **Accurate self-positioning with steadfast developmental goals.** Although closely related to political parties and politics, the Adenauer Foundation does not treat political activities as its sole objective. Instead, it focuses on achieving long-term political philosophies and macro-political goals, continuously expanding new activities, methods, scope, and research fields while adhering to civic education as its fundamental and foundational activity. Therefore, Chinese think tanks should also clarify their self-positioning, fully leverage their strengths in specific fields, and build distinctive capabilities rather than pursuing comprehensiveness indiscriminately.
- (2) **Expand thinking, advance with the times, and innovate through adaptation.** In response to changing social environments, the Adenauer Foundation leverages new network media technologies and globalized think tank networks for more flexible external exchanges. Chinese think tanks should also keenly perceive and continuously adapt to changing times, making timely adjustments in content, methods, and strategies, particularly emphasizing the application of new technologies to broaden the scope and depth of dissemination and exchange.
- (3) **Adopt a global perspective and implement internationalization strategies.** Sound policy consultation and practice are based on comprehensive understanding of the overall environment and current realities. The Adenauer Foundation has deployed over 100 offices and 200 projects across more than 120 countries, with similar offices and projects continuously expanding globally. This globalized development path effectively facilitates policy consultation. Currently, Chinese think tank construction remains in its initial stage, with significant deficiencies in international deployment and globalized construction. Domestic think tanks should prioritize internationalization and globalization on their development agenda and gradually implement it. Only by understanding the world comprehensively can they formulate more holistic and strategic effective policies tailored to China's actual conditions, thereby fully leveraging think tanks' role in national and social development. Simultaneously, implementing internationalization strategies enhances the global influence of Chinese think tanks.
- (4) **Conduct diversified and multi-level exchanges to become a "down-to-earth" think tank.** Organizing various forms of discussions to strengthen dialogue among policymakers, business communities, academia, and society constitutes an important reason why the Adenauer Foundation's work can better serve social development. When conducting policy-related work, Chinese think tanks should strengthen exchanges with all stakeholders, understand actual social conditions and real needs, and propose more practical, implementable suggestions that genuinely benefit social development.

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