

Research on the Optimization of Enterprise Criminal Compliance System against the Background of Rule of Law in the Business Environment

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ABSTRACT

In the context where the legalized business environment is increasingly becoming an important cornerstone of economic development, the healthy development of enterprises has become more crucial. As a vital component, the enterprise compliance system should be further optimized. Currently, the enterprise compliance system faces issues such as imperfect legislation, a lack of coordination between administrative and criminal law enforcement, and problems with evaluation mechanisms. It is necessary to establish and improve the criminal compliance system for enterprises through perfecting legislation, mutual recognition of administrative and criminal law enforcement systems, and optimizing evaluation mechanisms, in order to cope with the increasingly complex and changing domestic and international legal environments and build a legalized business environment.

KEYWORDS

The rule of law in the business environment; Corporate compliance; Criminal compliance

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as its core has attached great importance to the development of a legalized business environment. General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized, "The rule of law is the best business environment." The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly stated, "We will create a world-class business environment that is market-oriented, governed by law, and internationally connected." The legalization of the business environment emphasizes maintaining fair competition and safeguarding market order in accordance with the law in economic activities. It requires the government to administer in accordance with the law and refrain from arbitrarily interfering with the normal operation of the market economy, while clarifying the rights protection and responsibility constraints of enterprises. By establishing a comprehensive legal system, we can prevent monopolistic and unfair competition behaviors, protect the legitimate rights and interests of enterprises, and enhance the stability and predictability of the investment environment.

The quality of the business environment is a crucial evaluation metric for the development prospects of enterprises and the investment attraction capabilities of a country or region. Optimizing the business environment is a shared global challenge. The business environment is not merely an economic issue but also a fusion of various issues such as policy, society, and law. The rule of law serves as the foundation for ensuring a favorable business environment, and enterprise compliance is a vital aspect in establishing a legalized business environment. Compliance with laws and regulations by enterprises is the cornerstone of business operations. Undoubtedly, the establishment and

refinement of an enterprise criminal compliance system represent an ideal pathway to achieving a legalized business environment.

Enterprise compliance refers to enterprises adhering to laws and regulations, industry norms, and ethical standards in their business activities, preventing and avoiding legal risks, and safeguarding their legitimate rights and social responsibilities. Enterprise compliance has become an important component of corporate self-governance and social institutional development, with broad connotations and extensions. It encompasses enterprises conducting business in accordance with laws, regulations, systems, norms, and other rules and regulations, and has the responsibility to urge their staff and cooperating enterprises to act in accordance with laws and regulations as well. Initially led by procuratorates, with the continuous development of the compliance system, Chief Justice Zhang Jun of the Supreme People's Court has also pointed out that no enterprise should collapse solely due to involvement in a case. This provides directional guidance for continuously deepening the reform of enterprise compliance in cases and for judicial authorities in handling criminal compliance cases.

In the current context of legalized construction of the business environment, the importance of establishing an enterprise compliance system is self-evident, as the two complement and promote each other. Therefore, it is essential to explore the establishment and improvement of enterprise criminal compliance mechanisms in the context of legalized business environments.

2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEGALIZATION OF THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT AND ENTERPRISE COMPLIANCE

2.1. A Legalized Business Environment is the Prerequisite and Foundation for Enterprise Compliance

A legalized business environment provides favorable external conditions for enterprise compliance. In such an environment, the government administers in accordance with the law, the market order is stable, and enterprises find it easier to abide by laws, regulations, and industry norms, which facilitates the achievement of enterprise compliance objectives.

Firstly, a rule-of-law-based business environment provides a crucial cornerstone for the prosperous development of enterprises – a stable and predictable legal framework. Within this meticulously constructed framework, the clarity, consistency, and continuity of laws and regulations serve as a solid support for enterprise operations. These characteristics not only provide enterprises with clear legal guidance, enabling them to define the legal boundaries of their actions and effectively avoid compliance risks arising from frequent legal changes or uncertainties, but also significantly enhance their confidence and expectations for future development. In such an environment, enterprises do not need to constantly worry about sudden changes in legal policies adversely affecting their operations; instead, they can allocate more energy and resources to the development and innovation of their core businesses. This stability not only aids enterprises in formulating and implementing more long-term and robust strategic plans, allowing them to maintain a leading position in the fierce market competition, but also promotes their steady progress in the market and achieves sustainable development. Therefore, the establishment of a rule-of-law-based business environment holds immense value in promoting the healthy development of enterprises and the prosperity and stability of society.

A legalized business environment plays a pivotal role in enhancing the protection of enterprise rights and interests. By establishing and continuously refining a comprehensive and robust legal system, the government creates a robust framework that offers enterprises a variety of legal remedies. These remedies ensure that enterprises can obtain timely, effective, and equitable legal support whenever they face unfair treatment, infringement of their rights, or other legal disputes. This comprehensive rights protection mechanism significantly strengthens enterprises' sense of security and stability. It

reassures them that their investments, innovations, and operations are safeguarded under the law, fostering an environment of trust and confidence. Consequently, enterprises are more inclined to actively engage in market competition, knowing that they have a solid legal support to rely on. They are also more motivated to adhere to compliant operations, as the legal system provides clear guidelines and penalties for non-compliance, thus promoting a culture of integrity and law-abiding behavior among enterprises.

A legalized business environment strives to create a market environment with fair competition. By strengthening law enforcement efforts in areas such as anti-monopoly and anti-unfair competition, the government cracks down on various illegal and non-compliant behaviors to maintain a fair competitive order in the market. This environment helps enterprises to win market positions based on their own strengths and innovation capabilities, rather than gaining competitive advantages through improper means. Therefore, enterprises are more inclined to enhance their competitiveness through compliant operations.

2.2. Enterprise Compliance is an Important Component and Concrete Manifestation of A Legalized Business Environment

The establishment and improvement of enterprise compliance systems is one of the important aspects of constructing a legalized business environment. As the main players in the market economy, enterprises' compliance behavior directly relates to the stability of the market order and the effectiveness of constructing a legalized business environment.

The establishment and improvement of enterprise compliance systems constitute a crucial part of internal corporate governance. By establishing a sound compliance management system, enterprises can ensure that all business activities comply with laws, regulations, and industry norms. This refinement of internal governance not only helps enhance the enterprise's management level and operational efficiency but also strengthens its compliance awareness and risk prevention capabilities. When enterprises generally possess a high level of compliance, the overall level of legalization in the business environment will also correspondingly increase.

The enterprise compliance system also reflects the fulfillment of corporate social responsibility. In a legalized business environment, enterprises must not only pursue economic benefits but also actively fulfill their social responsibilities, such as environmental protection and consumer rights protection. Through compliant operations, enterprises can better balance the relationship between economic benefits and social responsibilities, achieving sustainable development. This fulfillment of social responsibility helps enhance the enterprise's social image and brand value, thereby contributing positively to the construction of a legalized business environment.

The implementation of the enterprise compliance system also aids in cultivating a compliance culture within the enterprise. Compliance culture is a set of values and behavioral norms within the enterprise that requires employees to always abide by laws, regulations, and corporate rules and regulations in their daily work. Through long-term compliance practices and promotional education, enterprises can gradually form a positive atmosphere where complying with regulations is viewed as honorable and violating them is considered shameful. The cultivation of this compliance culture helps to elevate the overall compliance level of the enterprise, providing solid support for the construction of a legalized business environment.

3. CURRENT STATUS AND EXISTING ISSUES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF ENTERPRISE COMPLIANCE SYSTEMS

3.1. Current Status

In March 2020, the Supreme People's Procuratorate initiated a pilot program for reform in enterprise compliance related to cases in six grassroots procuratorates in Shanghai, Jiangsu, Shandong, and Guangdong. In March 2021, the Supreme People's Procuratorate decided to expand the scope of the pilot program and deployed a second phase of the one-year pilot in 10 provinces and municipalities, including Beijing and Guangdong. In April 2022, the Supreme People's Procuratorate, together with the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, held a working conference to deploy the comprehensive promotion of the reform of enterprise compliance related to cases nationwide based on the earlier pilot programs, marking the entry into a stage of full implementation for the reform.

From the analysis of existing data, it is evident that the establishment and implementation of enterprise compliance systems have produced a series of positive and beneficial effects on the operational development of enterprises. These systems have not only enhanced the management level and operational efficiency of enterprises but also helped shape their good images and strengthen their market competitiveness. However, despite these achievements, we cannot ignore the fact that in practical operations, the promotion of enterprise compliance systems still faces a series of urgent issues and challenges that need to be addressed.

3.2. Issues

Although the establishment of enterprise compliance systems has become a hot topic of concern in both the corporate and legal communities, and remarkable achievements have indeed been made in practical implementation, we must be acutely aware that corporate criminal compliance, as an "imported concept" originating from abroad, must undergo a process of localization and development to take root and produce effective results in China. This process is not something that can be accomplished overnight; it requires time and the accumulation of practical experience, and is inevitably accompanied by a series of issues and challenges. Currently, the problems faced by corporate criminal compliance during its localization and development process involve multiple levels and dimensions, requiring concerted efforts and collaborative solutions from the government, enterprises, and all sectors of society. Specifically, these problems are manifested in the following aspects:

Firstly, the legislative system is still not perfect. Although China has issued a series of relevant laws, regulations, and policy documents, specialized legislation for corporate criminal compliance is still relatively lagging behind, resulting in a lack of clear and specific legal guidance and norms for enterprises in practical operations.

Secondly, the coordination between criminal and administrative laws is not smooth. Corporate criminal compliance involves multiple areas such as criminal and administrative laws. However, in practice, the coordination between criminal and administrative laws is not smooth, making it difficult for enterprises to obtain timely and effective legal support and protection when facing compliance risks.

Thirdly, the evaluation mechanism is vague and not specific. Currently, the evaluation mechanism for corporate criminal compliance is not yet perfect, with relatively vague and ambiguous evaluation standards and processes. This makes it difficult to accurately reflect the compliance status and risk level of enterprises. To a certain extent, this affects the fairness and accuracy of the evaluation results and also restricts the in-depth promotion of enterprise compliance construction.

3.2.1. Incomplete system

Currently, China has not established a comprehensive legal entity and procedural system for "decriminalization" within corporate criminal compliance. Prosecutors only decide not to prosecute in a small portion of criminal cases. Specifically, from the perspective of enterprises, once an enterprise is convicted by the court, regardless of the specific charge and penalty, it is difficult to escape the stigma of being labeled a "criminal enterprise" by public opinion. This label undoubtedly deals a heavy blow to its brand image, further affecting the enterprise's market position, customer trust, daily operations, and other dimensions, thereby threatening the foundation of its survival and development and even impacting the business environment. Therefore, an important internal driving force for enterprises to actively promote the construction of criminal compliance systems is to seek the positive effect of "legal exemption," that is, through a series of compliance measures, they hope to prompt prosecutors to make a decision of non-prosecution at the stage of reviewing and prosecuting, thereby avoiding a formal conviction record and maintaining the enterprise's clean image.

With the continuous improvement of China's criminal procedure legal system, the role of the "non-prosecution" system in handling criminal cases has become increasingly important and diversified, providing multiple pathways for the defense, including non-prosecution due to reasonable doubt, discretionary non-prosecution, and conditional non-prosecution for minors, to achieve procedural "exoneration" effects. However, the application of these "exoneration" pathways is subject to strict thresholds: The application of non-prosecution due to reasonable doubt requires that after comprehensive investigation and evidence collection, the procuratorial organs find that the evidence in the case is insufficient to meet the prosecution standards, meaning there are reasonable doubts and a complete evidence chain cannot be formed to support prosecution. Discretionary non-prosecution, also known as relative non-prosecution, has more specific application conditions, limited only to cases where the defendant's criminal conduct is significantly minor or where there are circumstances prescribed by law for leniency, mitigation, or even exemption from punishment, before it can be considered for application. Conditional non-prosecution is specifically designed for minors, aiming to balance education and redemption. Its application is strictly limited to specific types of crimes and sentencing ranges and is usually accompanied by a series of educational and corrective conditions tailored for minors. If criminal compliance fails to obtain clear legislative support and guarantees over time, the consequence will be a significant decline in the enthusiasm and motivation of criminal enterprises to promote criminal compliance construction.

Moreover, due to the current lack of a unified and standardized system, compliance standards across different industries and regions may indeed vary significantly. The existence of such differences undoubtedly poses great challenges for enterprises in accurately grasping the specific requirements of compliance in practical operations. Especially when facing cross-industry and cross-regional business cooperation, enterprises often need to expend considerable time and effort to understand and adapt to the compliance standards of various regions, which undoubtedly increases their operational and time costs. Additionally, the ambiguity of compliance standards is also an issue that cannot be ignored. When compliance standards are not clear enough, enterprises often find it difficult to judge whether their actions meet the compliance requirements, potentially leading them into legal risks due to misjudgment. This ambiguity can not only cause direct economic losses to enterprises but also damage their reputation and credibility, thereby affecting their long-term development.

3.2.2. Coordination issues between sentencing and execution

In the legal provisions of most foreign countries, when a company is involved in criminal offenses, it is generally the prosecutor's office that files a case or initiates an investigation. In countries with a case law system, such as the United States, if a company is suspected of illegal or criminal activities, government departments will usually report the situation to the Federal Department of Justice and request its intervention for investigation. The functions of the United States Department of Justice are similar to those of our country's procuratorial organs. In countries with a continental law system,

investigative agencies fulfill the duties of procuratorial organs. Therefore, when a company is suspected of committing a crime, these agencies can conduct investigations and inspections of corporate compliance as early as possible, effectively saving time.

According to the current criminal legal system framework in China, the case-filing jurisdiction of procuratorial organs primarily focuses on specific types of crimes involving enterprises, such as corruption, bribery, and smuggling, while public security organs bear the responsibility for the jurisdiction and investigation of most crimes committed by enterprises. Under the guidance of public security organs' investigation, the investigation work carried out on suspected criminal enterprises often takes a long time. To ensure the smooth progress and effectiveness of the investigation, public security organs may adopt compulsory investigative measures such as detention and arrest against key personnel of the enterprise and implement measures such as sealing and seizing the enterprise's assets, production equipment, and other property in accordance with the law. These series of measures inevitably have a serious impact on the daily operations of the enterprise, even leading to a complete halt of production and business activities. After the public security organs complete their investigation, the case will be transferred to the procuratorial organs for review and prosecution. At this point, the enterprise has already faced various challenges and difficulties.

On the other hand, administrative organs can punish enterprises involved in violations by imposing fines and other penalties, while procuratorial organs do not have the power to punish and cannot penalize enterprises during the compliance process, which may allow enterprises undergoing compliance review to avoid penalties. Additionally, administrative law enforcement departments do not have a statutory obligation to cooperate with criminal law enforcement departments in handling corporate crime cases, which can also easily lead to issues of poor convergence between administrative and criminal enforcement.

3.2.3. Imperfect evaluation mechanism

The compliance system in China is still in the initial stage of construction and exploration, and a unified and clear framework for assessment standards in the field of criminal compliance by procuratorial organs has not yet been formed. This poses significant challenges to effective assessment in practical operations, accompanied by many practical difficulties that need to be resolved urgently.

In 2022, the General Office of the Supreme People's Procuratorate, along with other relevant offices, introduced the "Measures for the Construction, Evaluation, and Review of Compliance by Enterprises Involved in Cases (Trial Version)." Article 14 mentions the key points for assessing the compliance construction plan and compliance operation system of criminal enterprises. However, the expressions such as "effective identification," "comprehensive safeguard," and "timely disposal" in the text are not specific enough, leading to difficulties for procuratorial organs in effectively assessing the compliance rectification status of criminal enterprises. Apart from the imperfections in the procuratorial organs' evaluation mechanism, the provisions regarding third-party evaluation mechanisms are also outlined in the "Guiding Opinions on Establishing a Third-Party Supervision and Evaluation Mechanism for Compliance by Enterprises Involved in Cases (Trial Version)" jointly issued by the Supreme People's Procuratorate and various ministries and commissions. This document stipulates that third-party organizations should evaluate the practicability, effectiveness, and comprehensiveness of the compliance construction plans of enterprises involved in cases. Due to the generality of the regulations on evaluation, they cannot be tailored to the specific circumstances of each enterprise, making it difficult to accurately assess the situation of the enterprises.

At the same time, we must recognize that there are significant differences in size, industry, and nature among enterprises. Therefore, if the assessment mechanism is applied mechanically and indiscriminately using the same set of criteria, it will lack scientific rigor and fail to address specific issues with targeted measures. For enterprises of different sizes, large enterprises and small-to-medium-sized enterprises often face vastly different risks and challenges, requiring targeted

compliance measures to address them. Similarly, enterprises in different industries have their unique operating models and legal risk points, necessitating customized compliance strategies to ensure their stable development. Furthermore, the nature of an enterprise can also influence the focus of its compliance needs; for instance, state-owned enterprises and private enterprises may have different priorities and requirements in terms of compliance management. Therefore, we must flexibly adjust and optimize the assessment mechanism based on the actual situation of enterprises to ensure that it truly achieves practical results and supports enterprises in achieving compliant operations and sustainable development.

4. RESEARCH ON OPTIMIZATION OF ENTERPRISE COMPLIANCE

4.1. Improve Upon Legislative Inadequacies and Deficiencies

To fully and deeply stimulate the positive criminal incentives of corporate compliance, the primary task is to formally and clearly incorporate the criminal compliance system into China's current legal system. This implies that we need to clearly define the criminal compliance system as a legal ground upon which enterprises can rely when involved in criminal cases, in order to apply for exemption or mitigation of their criminal responsibilities. Through such legislative confirmation, we can ensure that when taking lenient measures towards enterprises, there is a clear legal basis, making the entire process both compliant with the spirit of the rule of law and standardized. In this way, corporate compliance can not only become a powerful tool for enterprises to exercise self-restraint and self-improvement but also play a positive role in the field of criminal justice, promoting the construction of the rule of law in society and the healthy development of the economy.

At the procedural law level, to further enhance the incentive effect of criminal compliance, it is necessary to design and implement a special mechanism for exempting or acquitting enterprises involved in cases that have not yet established an effective criminal compliance system from prosecution. The core of this mechanism lies in assessing the enterprise's compliance construction and improvement before and after the offense. If the enterprise demonstrates a sincere willingness to comply and takes substantive measures to strengthen internal management and prevent future crimes, procuratorial organs may consider making a decision to exempt it from prosecution or apply other non-punitive treatment options, provided that legal conditions are met. At the substantive law level, for enterprises involved in cases that have established a sound criminal compliance system, we should actively explore and establish a compliance-based defense mechanism for acquittal. The core value of this mechanism is that when an enterprise faces criminal charges, if it can fully demonstrate that it has established an effective compliance system and that this system has played a substantive role in preventing or promptly detecting and correcting illegal conduct, then the enterprise should have the right to seek mitigation or exemption of its criminal responsibility based on a compliance-based defense for acquittal.

At the same time, during the revision and improvement of the General Provisions of the Criminal Law, we can consider formally introducing criminal compliance as a statutory mitigating circumstance for sentencing. This measure aims to address a notable gap in the current legal system, namely, the dilemma faced by enterprises that, due to specific constraints, cannot directly apply the principle of "compliance as a defense" and thus find their prior compliance efforts and achievements insufficiently recognized during sentencing when facing criminal charges. By establishing criminal compliance as a statutory mitigating circumstance, we can not only encourage more enterprises to actively build and improve their compliance systems, enhance their legal awareness and risk management capabilities, but also provide judges with a clearer and more specific sentencing reference standard in judicial practice, ensuring that compliant enterprises receive fair and reasonable treatment when facing legal challenges. In this way, the enthusiasm and effectiveness of enterprise

compliance construction will be significantly improved, further promoting the establishment of a healthy and orderly legalized business environment.

4.2. Procuratorial Early Intervention And Establishment of a Mutual Recognition System for Administrative Penalties and Criminal Sanctions

To avoid the aforementioned scenario where the procuratorial organs delay the implementation of enterprise compliance due to investigations, the procuratorial organs can, either on their own initiative or through the invitation of the public security organs, initiate a review of the necessity of enterprise compliance for criminal enterprises at the stage of filing a case for investigation, or activate the criminal compliance system at this stage. This proactive approach aims to ensure that the investigation process does not hinder the timely development and implementation of compliance measures within the enterprise. By conducting this review early on, the procuratorial organs can assess whether the enterprise has taken adequate steps to establish and maintain compliance, and provide guidance and support where necessary. This not only helps to protect the legitimate rights and interests of enterprises but also promotes the overall improvement of the compliance environment, contributing to the establishment of a legalized and orderly business environment.

Meanwhile, to effectively avoid the disconnection between administrative penalties and criminal sanctions, a mutual recognition mechanism for criminal compliance can be established. For instance, administrative departments can be invited to provide advisory recommendations on whether to apply compliance during the review and prosecution stage, participate in overseeing the compliance construction phase, and take part in the final procuratorial hearing, thereby enhancing the joint enforcement efforts between administrative and procuratorial authorities. For enterprises deemed not to be prosecuted after criminal compliance, administrative departments should also ensure proper coordination by deciding whether to impose administrative penalties based on the enterprise's compliance rectification efforts.

4.3. Improve the Evaluation System

The improvement of compliance assessment can be comprehensively considered from the following two aspects: Firstly, we need to evaluate whether the criminal compliance plan of the enterprise involved in the case is truly effective. This requires us to conduct a comprehensive review of the plan's formulation, implementation, and execution effectiveness to ensure that it can genuinely play a role in preventing crime and regulating corporate behavior. Secondly, we must also pay attention to whether the enterprise has genuinely acquired the ability to identify, prevent, and address criminal risks after completing compliance establishment and rectification, in order to prevent the occurrence of recidivism. Specifically, effective compliance assessment involves two major aspects: formal standards and substantive standards. In terms of formal standards, before initiating the compliance review, we should first conduct a formal examination of the plan submitted by the enterprise. This stage mainly focuses on the completeness, compliance, and operability of the plan, thereby initially judging its compliance effectiveness. As for substantive standards, for enterprises that have already established a compliance system, we should introduce third-party assessment agencies to conduct in-depth evaluations. This includes examining whether a true compliance culture has been formed within the enterprise and whether employees generally adhere to compliance norms; at the same time, we must also pay attention to whether the enterprise has established a sound internal compliance supervision system to ensure that compliance measures can be continuously and effectively implemented. Through comprehensive assessment based on these two standards, we can more accurately judge the level of an enterprise's compliance and thus provide more targeted guidance and support to the enterprise.

Additionally, it is worth noting that due to the differences in enterprise size and industry, their compliance assessment mechanisms should be correspondingly adjusted and optimized to achieve

more precise and effective evaluations. Specifically, for small and micro-enterprises, given their smaller scale and operational flexibility, the construction and improvement of their compliance systems may progress relatively quickly. Therefore, when conducting compliance assessments for these enterprises, the inspection period should not be as long as that for large enterprises. Instead, assessments should be tailored to the actual situation of small and micro-enterprises to better reflect their compliance levels. For large enterprises, however, due to their large scale and complex operations, the construction and improvement of their compliance systems may require longer time and more resource investment. Consequently, when conducting compliance assessments for large enterprises, the inspection period should be appropriately extended to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the actual situation of their compliance systems. At the same time, the assessment content should also be more detailed, covering all aspects of enterprise compliance management, to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the assessment results.

5. CONCLUSION

In the context of a law-based business environment, the establishment of corporate compliance systems is not only crucial for enterprises to effectively prevent legal risks and continuously enhance their market competitiveness, but also a vital component in driving China's high-quality economic development and building a new open economic system. By carefully designing and implementing scientific, comprehensive, and effective compliance management systems, enterprises can not only more keenly perceive and adapt to the complexities and changes in domestic and international legal environments but also, with their exceptional compliance management capabilities, gain more valuable development opportunities and broader development spaces in the increasingly fierce market competition. Such compliance building not only contributes to the healthy and stable development of enterprises themselves but also provides indispensable momentum for the advancement of the rule of law and the prosperity and progress of the economy as a whole.

Moreover, such a system fosters a culture of integrity and accountability within enterprises, enhancing their reputation and trustworthiness in the market. This, in turn, attracts more business partners and investors, further boosting their economic performance. Additionally, by adhering to compliance standards, enterprises contribute to maintaining a fair and orderly market environment, promoting healthy competition, and ultimately driving sustainable economic growth. Therefore, the proactive adoption and continuous improvement of enterprise compliance systems are indispensable strategies for both enterprises and the overall economy in the pursuit of long-term prosperity and stability.

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