

The Pressing Need for Constructive Globalism

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The international order that emerged after the end of the Cold War is crumbling. Great-power rivalries, national interests, particular ideologies and spheres of influence once again dominate international politics.

Yet the defining risks of the 21st century — climate disruption, fragile supply chains, financial contagion, pandemics and hard-to-govern technologies — are structurally global. They are indifferent to national preferences and ideological principles.

The real choice facing states is not between “sovereignty” and the “liberal international order” but between managed interdependence and unmanaged vulnerability.

This is why the current backlash against globalism is wrong. Critics on both the populist right and the anti-capitalist left rail against an imagined project of world government, turning “globalism” into a rhetorical scarecrow. The result is to evade the only choice that matters — whether governments will build credible frameworks to manage the risks all share, or whether they will leave their societies exposed to systemic shocks none may control.

A different approach is therefore needed that can overcome the polarization between what are often labeled cosmopolitans and nationalists. Call it **constructive globalism**: a deliberately modest, problem-driven form of cooperation that accepts geopolitical rivalry as a given but insists that not even major powers — let alone middle and smaller ones — can secure their citizens’ welfare alone. Progress in human development rests on overlapping, issue-specific coalitions of the willing, in which participation is voluntary for states, but a commitment, once made, should be real.

Constructive globalism preserves the practical achievements of managed interdependence. At the same time, it rejects the intrusiveness of a liberal international order that is often perceived as a vehicle for the interests of the global economic elite.

Constructive globalism prioritizes effective cooperation in addressing shared global problems without allowing international institutions to become instruments of Western or U.S. dominance.

This model for international cooperation sends a dual message. To the West, it calls to take the principles of a rules-based order seriously and apply them

consistently. To the rest of the world, it reminds not to abandon institutions that remain indispensable for solving common problems.

Global risks without borders

The most destabilizing risks of this century confront almost all countries at once, regardless of regime type, income level or alliance orientation.

Governments must simultaneously strengthen security, public health and economic resilience; secure a balanced and resilient digital infrastructure; and govern global public goods such as oceans and the climate.

They must also guard against systemic shocks that cascade across borders. These include democratic backsliding, artificial intelligence deployed without safeguards, climate-related disasters, financial crises, supply-chain breakdowns and irregular migration flows that destabilize not only states, but entire regions.

These risks do not respect territorial borders or wait for electoral calendars. They punish complacency and delay.

That is why policymakers and business leaders should treat credible cross-border coalitions based on mutual self-interest not merely as the fruit of sound diplomacy, but as the core of any viable long-term risk-management strategy.

Properly designed, such networks — built as predictable, interoperable frameworks — reduce uncertainty, improve efficiency and act as force multipliers, thus lowering the cost of capital and expanding the reach and effectiveness of public and private action.

Handling these risks effectively is not only in the interest of mankind, but it is also a fundamental interest of all states, independent of their political preferences or form of constitution.

There is evidence that the current crisis of liberal democracies is driven to a significant extent by governing structures' perceived ineffectiveness at solving problems.

At the same time, liberal democracies that provide relatively equal access to public goods such as health, mobility, education and a sustainable environment are perceived as more legitimate and are less challenged by authoritarian parties.

But it is not only liberal democracies that are in trouble. Dissatisfaction is shared by constituencies in many different political systems as citizens stop believing their leaders can deliver. Governments' failure to develop a form of managed interdependence is a key factor in their inability to face structural problems; it directly and persistently feeds their constituents' dissatisfaction.

A strategy of managed interdependence

Constructive globalism is not an appeal to naive idealism. It is a strategy for managing unavoidable interdependence with hard-headed realism. It starts from what works, not from what sounds good in communiqués.

Three design principles are central. First, constructive globalism is **problem-driven, not ideology-driven**. Meaningful cooperation is built around concrete challenges that affect actors at national, regional and global levels and then around the coalitions, standards and institutions needed to address them. The question is not "Who shares our worldview?" but, "Who shares our exposure to this specific risk?"

Second, it is **variable in geometry**. Not every country needs to be at every table. Plurilateral arrangements, regional compacts and functional "clubs" can coexist and interlock, so long as they remain transparent and open to additional members willing to meet the relevant standards. Such cooperation is already visible in trade and technology governance, where smaller but ambitious coalitions have moved faster than universal forums.

Third, constructive globalism must be backed by **enforceable rules**. For areas such as emissions, data and finance, credible cooperation requires forums where overreach and non-compliance can be contested. Without some recourse for states harmed by free-riding or abuse, the incentives to participate will erode over time.

Fourth, rule violations must be assessed by **independent bodies** to ensure an even application and implementation of the rules. If only a few states set the rules, the idea of a system remaining based on rules loses credibility and causes resistance.

Far from undermining sovereignty, such arrangements can reinforce it by strengthening transparency and accountability. In an age of cross-border shocks, sovereign capacity increasingly depends on the ability to shape external rules and to rely on others' compliance. In that sense, constructive globalism is sovereignty by other means.

Democracy, inequality and economic realism

Any realistic global strategy must confront a common domestic political problem: Electoral politics has evolved into what might be called a system of **competitive overpromising**.

Political parties bid for support by creating expectations they know they cannot meet given fiscal constraints and modest growth prospects. The inevitable result is disillusionment and a steady erosion of support for democratic institutions.

Safeguarding democracy therefore requires addressing both sides of the equation: the global commons and the domestic distribution of opportunity. Constructive globalism can help states manage the former, but it cannot substitute for national choices on the latter. Societies that tolerate stark and persistent inequalities of outcome — and, more importantly, of opportunity — undermine the perceived fairness of their systems and undercut their potential for sustainable growth.

This is where **economic realism** comes in. Governments that embrace cooperative approaches must align them with the hard arithmetic of public and private budgets. In Europe in particular, grand visions of social transformation too often ignore constrained budgets and demographic headwinds. Constructive globalism demands the opposite: an honest inventory of what resources can be mobilized domestically and what efficiencies can be unlocked by pooling efforts across borders.

The stakes are high. Societies across the world are operating under intense internal strain — from stagnant wages and generational divides to cultural polarization and the disruptive impact of new technologies. In this context, transparent, problem-solving cooperation is the only credible antidote to drift, whether that come in the form of domestic stalemate or gradual multi-level failure.

For citizens, by contrast, a shift toward constructive, responsibly delineated, technology-enhanced globalism offers the prospect of more secure and broadly shared prosperity.

By widening access to innovation and medicines and establishing shared guardrails for technologies that threaten jobs, privacy and security, the constructive globalist approach can reduce the frequency and severity of crises. The purpose is not benevolent globalization for its own sake; it is crisis prevention as a core function of modern local, national, regional and global governance.

Beyond the false choice of great powers

The most important political contribution of constructive globalism is that it offers an escape from a false choice, that between national isolation and submission to the whims of self-declared great powers. Those pathways increase, rather than reduce, vulnerability.

The United States and China, despite their current ambitions, both are limited in their ability to lead and have themselves become sources of global instability.

Hyperactive unilateral industrial policies driven by a desire for economic autarky will prove costly, whether undertaken by Washington or Beijing. More significantly, they are poor tools for managing global risks. Their competing projects of superpower unilateralism may reshape the map of influence, but they do little to contain climate change, prevent financial contagion or manage the challenges and opportunities of artificial intelligence.

For many states, this moment of imperial distraction creates space and necessity for a different strategy. Washington's alliance trimming and erratic unilateralism have forced traditional partners in Europe and Asia to reckon with new realities. No longer able to assume a stable American umbrella, these countries must invest decisively in their own military, economic, technological, cultural and social resilience.

Confronted wisely, this shift can have two benefits. First, it can spur middle and smaller powers to develop their own capacities rather than free-riding on U.S. security guarantees. Second, it can motivate them to pursue **active multi-alignment**: seeking pragmatic governance solutions and new partners and forms of cooperation, while still prioritizing their national values.

Viewed in this manner, constructive globalism is not a utopian alternative to power politics. It is power politics updated for a world of ever-denser de facto interdependence. States that invest in issue-specific coalitions, interoperable rules, and shared enforcement mechanisms will be better positioned to shape the terms of globalization rather than be shaped by them.

The task now is to move from concept to practice—to turn constructive globalism from a defensive response into a proactive strategy. That means treating cross-border cooperation on global risks not as an add-on to grand strategy, but as its organizing principle.

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