

Cross-Border Learning as a Strategic Core to Implement the Agenda of Constructive Globalism

Executive summary

Cross-border learning is the strategic hinge between most countries' domestic reform capacity and constructive globalism. It is an important instrument to manage global risks.

Cross-border learning enables states to overcome internal stalemates, identify viable external models and convert those models into the building blocks of overlapping, problem-driven coalitions. For middle powers in particular, this readiness to learn across borders is a key requirement in the new global environment.

Under conditions of superpower unilateralism, middle powers that refuse cross-border learning will struggle to keep their autonomy and may become objects of external will. Those that institutionalize cross-border learning, by contrast, gain a better chance to shape standards, pool capabilities, strengthen democracy through credible delivery and build the forms of managed interdependence on which constructive globalism depends.

Constructive globalism is a problem-driven strategy to use managed interdependence to tackle risks that nation states face in common, since they are structurally global in character. These include security, public health, digital infrastructure, economic resilience, climate, financial contagion, supply chains and migration.

States need the capacity to identify workable external solutions and adapt them to their respective domestic settings. The overall goal is to embed them in overlapping coalitions and common frameworks.

Constructive globalism is defined as a dense set of issue-specific and voluntary but credible coalitions, organized around concrete problems rather than ideology, variable geometry rather than universal participation and enforceable commitments

rather than rhetorical aspiration. It cannot work without a mechanism that allows states to discover, compare, and adapt successful approaches across jurisdictions. That mechanism is cross-border learning.

Cross-border learning goes way beyond technocracy

Cross-border learning involves the systematic evaluation of experiences and policy approaches made by other countries in their attempts to deal with pressing global issues, and, based on that effort, their translation into domestic reform through means such as policy transfer, diffusion or convergence.

The common objection to this approach is that such learning is technocratic or even consciously depoliticizing. On the contrary, cross-border learning is a deliberate strategy to politicize the effective pursuit of constructive solutions by confronting entrenched domestic interests with the fact that viable policy alternatives exist beyond the given nation's borders.

This point matters conceptually because it shifts the function of learning from narrow policy optimization to political transformation. Cross-border learning expands the range of legitimate options in domestic democratic debates, exposes prevailing forms of status quo bias, and, above all, forces political actors to justify why national routines should prevail when comparable democracies have solved the problem more effectively in a different manner.

This approach of combining constructive globalism and cross-border learning is therefore best understood as a deliberate strategy of politicization, which is the opposite of the presumed expert-led insulation from politics with which the term “globalism” is often associated.

Constructive globalism and the need for learning

The constructive globalism concept rejects the conventional binary choice between globalism and sovereignty. Instead, it frames the real choice as one between managed interdependence and unmanaged vulnerability.

Without cross-border learning, states lack the knowledge to decide which regulatory models, financing structures, institutional designs and policy compromises are robust enough to support cooperation beyond the nation-state.

Focus on the middle powers

The relationship between cross-border learning and constructive globalism is especially important for so-called middle powers. In a world shaped by two superpowers who tend to act unilaterally, middle powers do not possess the scale of the United States or China, nor can they secure prosperity, technological relevance or strategic autonomy by relying exclusively on domestic market size or coercive leverage.

These states have a powerful incentive to deepen cross-border learning. It helps to prevent them from becoming mere objects on the global stage. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that under contemporary geopolitical conditions, the readiness to engage in cross-border learning is the *conditio sine qua non* for success of the middle powers.

Their task therefore is to build coalitions, pool capabilities, establish regulatory credibility and translate foreign policy, economic policy and other such domains into both domestic reform and international cooperation.

The measure of their power is their ability to aggregate capabilities with partners. For that reason, middle powers must constantly ask themselves which combinations of policy, regulation, finance and institutions have worked elsewhere, how those combinations can be adapted domestically, and how they might become the basis for wider clubs, compacts and norms.

If, instead, middle powers remain trapped in the inherited patterns of their respective national political economies, they are bound to face strategic drift. An external environment that is constantly becoming more coercive and less rule-bound will dramatically raise the price these nations have to pay for participation on the global stage.

The stakes in the present moment are high, and the incentive for middle powers to look across borders for common approaches has rarely been greater. Middle powers must coordinate, compare and learn to remain capable of shaping outcomes.

Europe as the critical test case

Europe provides the clearest example of both the necessity and the difficulty of this logic. The European Union can no longer afford to remain trapped in 27 separate (non-)reform logics if it wishes to compete with the United States and China, maintain prosperity and preserve its capacity to act. That is why cross-border learning is no longer a "nice-to-have," but a prerequisite for the realpolitik implementation of the European deal.

There is no question that this is difficult to bring about. National identity discourses, path dependencies, domestic coalitions and fears of "foreign" models routinely prevent the adaptation of proven solutions from neighboring democracies.

The result is a persistent implementation deficit: Europe often diagnoses its structural problems accurately but lacks the political capacity to move from diagnosis to reform.

This matters strategically, because Europe long conceived of itself as a giant on the world stage. Yet when cohesion continues to be rather weak and economic growth is insufficient, even such a presumed geopolitical giant increasingly risks becoming an object rather than a shaper of global order.

In that sense, Europe's current predicament is less an internal governance problem than a geopolitical warning about what happens when a large economic area fails to institutionalize cross-border learning with enough seriousness.

Crucially, Europe's vulnerability does not stem only from being exposed to harsh external pressures. It also stems from its lack of ability to turn internal diversity into an effective mechanism of collective learning and therefore into collective power.

Escaping the object of history characterization

Constructive globalism offers middle powers a way to escape effective self-degrading on the global stage by turning cross-border learning into a strategic method.

This is true inside Europe, but it also applies beyond it. Countries such as Canada, Japan and South Korea face comparable structural conditions. In and by themselves, they are wealthy, capable and institutionally sophisticated countries. Yet they operate in a geopolitical environment increasingly shaped by superpower rivalry and unilateralism. Their ability to avoid subordination depends on domestic adaptation and external coordination, including with partners beyond their immediate region.

Constructive globalism is attractive to such states because it does not require universal consensus or the preposterous assumption of a world government. It relies instead on overlapping coalitions, pragmatic governance and mutual self-interest.

But for these arrangements to become durable and substantive rather than rhetorical, participating states must reshape their domestic political culture to one

that treats learning from other countries as a mark of responsibility and strength rather than weakness.

Institutional and political implications

The pursuit of cross-border learning is a precondition for constructive globalism. If done successfully, this requires shared analytical frameworks, peer review, systematic evaluation of reform pathways and public-facing case studies that translate external knowledge into domestic political debate. Credible, interoperable frameworks and issue-specific coalitions should reduce uncertainty and enable practical cooperation on common risks.

Taken together, this framework suggests that middle powers require a distinct learning infrastructure. Such an infrastructure includes comparative policy analysis, mechanisms for adaptation rather than imitation, elite and public narratives that legitimate learning, as well as transnational forums in which solutions can be tested, contested and scaled.

Without these components, constructive globalism will remain too thin to resist either neo-national fragmentation or domination by superpowers.

The democratic dimension of this undertaking is central. If democracies continue to promise what constrained budgets and weak growth cannot deliver, public trust will erode further.

Cross-border learning offers one response because it increases the chance that reform agendas are grounded in tested solutions rather than domestic wishful thinking, while also making it easier to demonstrate the tangible benefits of external cooperation to citizens.

■