

BETWEEN EUROPEAN UNION AND THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE: A NEW GEOPOLITICAL ROLE OF POLAND?

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Abstract: This paper's aim is to provide a retrospective of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). The Initiative is made up of countries, with a leading role of Poland, that joined the European Union and NATO relatively late (EU – 2004, 2007, 2013; NATO – 1999, 2004, 2009), (does not apply to Austria and Greece) but have participated in these integration projects for several years, especially in the European Union and have sufficiently developed economically to want to throw off the corset of (semi)peripheral countries, which only adapt to the political and economic solutions generated by the countries belonging to the “core” of the EU. The will to participate more actively in this European project seems to be an important factor integrating the Three Seas countries, especially since for several years this organization has been experiencing a deep structural crisis. The paper's aim is to explain the multilevel tasks of the 3SI including its economic and geopolitical dimensions. It also includes a brief analysis of various theoretical approaches (classical realism, neorealism and constructivism) in understanding the 3SI throughout the comparative method.

Keywords: Three Seas Initiative, European Union, Poland, Economy, Security, Realism, Constructivism

Introduction – Three Seas Initiative (3SI)

The Three Seas is an initiative of thirteen countries located between the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea¹. It was established in 2015 by Polish President Andrzej Duda and Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović in order to tighten economic and infrastructure cooperation between the countries of the region. Currently, the condition for

¹ Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary.

membership in the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) is membership in the European Union. An interesting relationship can be observed: the need to establish a new regional organization was felt by the younger EU member states. Out of the 13 countries that created the Initiative, only Austria and Greece were members of the EU before 2004. This fact already shows that for the Initiative countries, activities within the EU were insufficient and they did not feel heard enough, hence the need to establish an organization that would become an arena for speaking loudly about issues that do not resonate enough in Paris or Berlin. As one Polish author notices: “3SI is an original project proposed by leaders representing the region, an autonomous project whose content and format were not imposed or suggested by external actors. (...) The Three Seas Initiative is a response to the diagnosis of common weaknesses of the countries in the region, the peripheral status imposed on them within the European Union, the preferred model of passive Europeanization according to the top-down scheme, and the constant treatment of the region as “New Europe”. One of the elements noticed and defined by the leaders of Central European countries (except Austria and Greece) was that there was a danger of falling into the middle-development trap, remaining an economy subordinated and auxiliary to larger markets” [Bajda 2020: 4-5].

Although the Member States differ significantly in terms of territory, population, economy, etc., the principle adopted is that cooperation takes place on a partnership basis, respecting the distinctiveness and sovereignty of individual countries. However, Radosław Zenderowski, an Author that extensively writes about the Initiative, notices that from the very beginning, some politicians and commentators who are not very friendly to the 3SI, have been spreading the thesis that Poland is returning to the pre-war concept of Intermarium. “Very often, even some commentators publicly used the name “Intermarium” instead of “Three Seas”. Thus, it was suggested that Warsaw intended to treat the Three Seas Initiative instrumentally in order to achieve its own geopolitical goals, including: monopolizing relations with the USA and acting on behalf of the entire region. Significantly, the same commentators almost always emphasized the existence of “traditionally bad” Polish-Russian relations, which was intended to discourage those countries that try to establish a relatively correct relationship relations with Moscow or more - they count on some privileges resulting from not pursuing an antagonistic policy towards the Russian Federation” [Zenderowski 2021: 41].

What would be the arguments of these unnamed “unfriendly commentators” mentioned by Zenderowski? The author of this paper can offer the following arguments: The 3SI is a revival of the anti-Russian military project of Polish Marshal Józef Piłsudski from the 1920s. Then the Marshal envisioned the creation of a military bloc of states from the Baltic to the Black and Adriatic seas to resist the Soviet Union. The military bloc militarizes the united space, with the help of which it will be possible to decisively break the ties between Russia and Germany. All this was supposed to lead to the encirclement of Russia with a “cordon sanitary node”, which would weaken and undermine its power. In short, it is all about setting up a massive barrier between Western Europe and Russia, as well as preparing for war against the “land of the Soviets”. The “Polish block” from the Polish to the Turkish border? The new undertaking of the Three Seas Initiative in the first quarter of the 21st century does not have primarily an economic, but a military-geopolitical goal: “gathering” the military potential of the participating countries, modern rearmament financed by the participating countries, increasing the number of American military bases, full coordination of allied armies in preparation for war, turning the territories around Russia into the epicenter of military tensions, taking over part of the tasks carried out by American contingents in Germany, Poland, Romania. It also points to its task related to the interruption or drastic reduction of the energy connection between Russia and the EU, and Russian gas should be replaced by the import of American liquefied gas, as well as gas from Israel and Azerbaijan². As mentioned above, the author of this paper might also be qualified as a skeptical observer of the Initiative as he publicly asked some fundamental questions as early as 2016.³

² The latter de facto happened after Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

³ This was a commentary for *biznesalert.pl*, published by the conservative Instytut Jagiellonski: „The aim of the 3SI was to discuss political issues and cooperation in the fields of energy and transport in this part of Europe. It is still an open question for many observers which part should dominate within this initiative. And if neither, what balance between them would be acceptable? Undoubtedly, good political cooperation in the region can and will have a positive impact on economic cooperation. At the same time, political issues may constitute an obstacle to the development of economic cooperation. It is the political differences, among others contributed to the failure of the pre-war concept of Intermarium, with which observers identify the current ABC Initiative. Nevertheless, a rhetorical question should be asked: if this concept is decades old, why is it being implemented so reluctantly? Isn't there a formal attempt to create an alliance or coalition of countries that naturally have different

But, are these arguments relevant? What is the reality of the Initiative?

Reality of the 3SI

Officially, from the Polish point of view, the 3SI since 2016 has primarily been a project of loose cooperation between thirteen EU countries. Its main goal has been to expand the infrastructure connecting the north and south of the eastern part of the EU and develop economic cooperation of this region in three areas: transport, energy and digitalization. When developing the concept of the Three Seas Initiative, participants had to define not only the subject of cooperation, but also had to choose the degree of its institutionalization and form. States when choosing a degree of institutionalization, strive to maximize benefits while optimizing the costs of managing a specific task. According to this line of thinking, further institutionalization would be needed. However, a very skeptical stance on this issue currently dominates within the participants of the Initiative. Currently, the issue of possible further institutionalization of the Three Seas Initiative is not the subject of public debate. Increasing the effectiveness of this cooperation is based on activities based on specific projects (project-oriented), and not on building permanent bureaucratic structures.

The Three Seas Initiative as a geopolitical project entered the operationalization phase in 2015–2016, when there was a tendency in Central Europe to look for an alternative to the previously leading orientation towards the Brussels-Berlin center. Already then, a factor that deeply determined changes in this part of the world was the first phase of the war in Ukraine (2014), blocking or slowing down most of the joint German-Russian projects, with the exception of the energy project in the

and divergent interests? Not only economic, but also political. The composition of the forum may confirm these fears: somewhat ironically, one may ask whether Europe will actually be strengthened by the improvement of, for example, Lithuanian-Albanian relations? Will the search for common interests in relations between, for example, Montenegro and Latvia really contribute to economic development and security in Europe? Is there really a genuine community of interests and goals here, considering the fundamentally different place of these countries on the geopolitical map of Europe?”, See: Babić: Bez integracji Międzymorze pozostanie forum dyskusyjnym AT: <https://biznes.alert.pl/babic-bez-integracji-miedzymorze-moze-zostac-forum-dyskusyjnym/> [Accessed: 22.3.2024]

form of Nordstream 2. The migration crisis and the relatively compact position of the Visegrad Group states in the face of the dislocation concept supported by Germany, gave another reason to question the growing influence of this country in Central and Eastern Europe (sometimes referred to as Mitteleuropa 2.0). The countries in the belt between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas clearly faced two scenarios: some form of bandwagoning, i.e. becoming part of the *modus operandi* of the Federal Republic of Germany and/or the Russian Federation, and the search for the possibility of creating an independent geopolitical quality that could constitute a response and an alternative to Mitteleuropa 2.0 and Eurasian tendencies.

3SI's flagship infrastructure projects: Via Carpatia, Via Baltica and the inland waterway based on the Oder, are mainly initiatives of the Polish government [Bieńczyk-Missala: 2019 322]. Via Carpatia as a strategic project in the field of road connections appeared in the concepts promoted by the authorities of the Republic of Poland. relatively early. In 2006, as a consequence of the International Conference "One Road - Four Countries", the Łańcut Declaration⁴ was signed by the ministers of transport of Hungary, Slovakia, Lithuania and Poland. Conceptual work has gained momentum since 2010, after Bulgaria, Romania and Greece joined the project. This expressway with highway elements was supposed to eventually lead from Klaipėda to Thessaloniki.

Via Baltica connects Poland (Warsaw) with Estonia (Tallinn), passing through Lithuania and Latvia. In addition to complementarity with Via Carpatia, the Baltic Road, combined with the Rail Baltica railway line, which is to be part of the Trans-European Transport Networks (TET-N) and the High-Speed Railway, is to connect Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland with the Baltic states. Ultimately, the functionality of the infrastructure complex supporting transport and logistics in the 3SI area is to be achieved. The previously mentioned project includes the project of a large logistics and transport HUB located in Poland – the Central Communication Port. The Baltic-Adriatic Corridor is to be the final keystone of the logistics and transport dimension of the Three Seas Initiative. Running through the territories of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Italy and Slovenia, it connects ports in Gdańsk, Gdynia, Szczecin and Świnoujście with ports in Trieste, Venice, Ravenna and Koper. By connecting agglomerations, logistics and transport terminals, sea ports and airports,

⁴ <https://www.prezydent.pl/archiwum-lecha-kaczynskiego/aktualnosci/rok-2006/art,150,1025,deklaracja-lancucka.html> (accessed: 20.3.2024)

safe and efficient multimodal transport chains for transporting people and goods will ultimately be created. The construction of such infrastructure will enable the implementation of sovereign choices, unencumbered by political and historical determinism inherited as a legacy of years of functioning in foreign state bodies or spheres of influence.

The countries of the Three Seas Initiative show great similarities in the conditions of energy security. All of them are far from energy independence and therefore must pursue policies aimed at increasing the level of energy security as a result of diversification and balancing of supplies. A significant part of them, as a legacy membership in the Soviet bloc, inherited poorly modernized economy with significant energy intensity, an energy sector based on high-emission coal-related technologies, a structural connection of the gas and oil transmission infrastructure with the Russian Federation [Ascari 2013: 14-17]. When characterizing the system, it is also worth pointing out the high degree of centralization and nationalization of companies operating on markets [Ruszel, Kucharska 2022]. Today, these challenges are met by the so-called the North-South gas corridor, the implementation of which will enable greater independence from energy resources from Russia, including by using a physical reverse. The corridor is to connect the LNG terminal in Świnoujście and the Baltic Gas Pipeline with the terminal on the island of Krk in Croatia. The newly opened Baltic Gas Pipeline enables the transmission of raw material on the Norway-Denmark-Poland line, although its final capacity has not been achieved⁵. In the gas reality of the region, initiatives are divided into two/three areas: the Baltic Sea, based on the Black Sea and the Adriatic Sea, with the latter two having many common elements. The essence of the Three Seas Initiative seems to be the attempt to connect them into one coordinated and agile system. Of course, this does not apply only to the gas. The development of other energy technologies: renewable energy, nuclear energy and – ultimately – hydrogen, make the 3SI project seem to be a promising prospect. If we assume that energy security is not limited to ensuring a constant supply of raw materials at an acceptable price, but is a geopolitical factor (energy geopolitics) [O’Sullivan 2013: 31-32], it becomes necessary to transfer reflection to the level of vital interests. The expansion of energy infrastructure, resulting in an increase in its complexity and therefore

⁵ <https://www.baltic-pipe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/3-SMDI-19022-019-niechorze.pdf> [accessed: 20.3.2024]

sensitivity, necessitates the launch of another one pillar of the Three Seas cooperation – this time in the field of a more classically understood security.

In the digital dimension, which for now seems to be placed lower than the other pillars in the hierarchy of the Initiative's objectives, a number of important initiatives have been undertaken. The Digital Three Seas Initiative (D3SI) has increased the level of quantitative and qualitative digitalization in the region. The flagship project is 3 Seas Digital Highway. Already on September 17, 2018, at the third Three Seas summit in Bucharest⁶ representatives of the Three Seas countries adopted the main strategic projects in the field of energy, transport and digital technology⁷. The latter established the 3 Seas Digital Highway, an integral part of D3SI, as one of the priority interconnection projects to strengthen secure north-south digital connections. It can fill gaps in the communication infrastructure, including fiber optics (both in the backbone and access layers) and 5G infrastructure.⁸ The planned digital infrastructure is to be implemented along the planned Three Seas transport and energy routes.

The 3SI versus selected theoretical approaches

In its functional dimension, the 3SI is a specific subsystem combining the capabilities of states, regional international institutions, more or less formalized regimes, mechanisms present in existing superior systems (e.g. European Union). In political terms, the stakes of the game are to increase the potential and ability to independently shape one's own security, understood as ensuring the possibility of survival and development. In fact, these issues concern the issue of power and, as such, situate the problem in the domains related to the realist paradigm – especially its structural and defensive trends. However, the responses to such identified threats, challenges and risks, and the adopted strategies – including those regarding opportunities – are built based on cooperative models. It therefore seems that neoliberal approaches should also be taken into account.

⁶ <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/trojmorze> [accessed: 21.3.2024]

⁷ https://pism.pl/publikacje/Wymiar_cyfrowy_Inicjatywy_Tr_jmorza [accessed: 21.3.2024]

⁸ https://digital3seas.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/digital3seas_initiative_roadmap_report_2018.pdf [accessed: 21.3.2024]

Regarding the latter, can we treat the 3SI as an “imaginary community”? True, 3SI is still not fully institutionalized. Its face is constantly being shaped and grinding, and its future is not yet decided. It is certainly one of the visible manifestations of new regionalism, born of the growing sense of threat from Russia and questions about the sufficient sensitivity of the West to these threats. However, an important element of the development of 3SI was the establishment of the ‘State of Poland foundation’, one of whose goals is to go beyond “hard” projects (politics, economics, infrastructure) and supplement them with soft, cultural projects. The program document here is the ‘Three Seas - a fascinating story’ published in 2021 Report and communication strategy [Nerada 2021: 35]. This strategic report can be treated as a kind of manifesto of the Three Seas Initiative. One of the goals set for 3SI is to build regional soft power. Soft power as a concept was constituted for the first time in Joseph S. Nye’s work “Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power”, published in 1990 (Nye 1990). For him, “soft power is the power to get what you want which is desired by attraction, not by compulsion or payment” (Nye 1990: 74) and the “ability of a state to use soft power is based on three basic resources: the culture of the state, political values (at home and abroad), and external politics (which must be legitimate and moral in the eyes of others)” (Nye 2011: 112). However, soft power measures primarily concern states, not supranational organizations such as the European Union or transnational initiatives such as 3SI. In relation to the EU, the concept of normative power is used more often than soft power, but this time with emphasis not on the moral position, but on the norm-creating power of the EU. Considering the fact that currently all members of the Initiative are also members of the European Union, it is also interesting to note that collective soft power can be strengthened through active participation in existing, larger organizations - and through cooperation within a bloc of countries perform effectively above their ‘weight class’. From this perspective, the collective soft power of the 3SI should be understood as a certain value, potentially complementing the “soft power” of the countries that constitute it. In order for a given entity, including supra- and international entities, to obtain moral capital, it must first become an entity. It must – referring to Benedict Anderson’s concept of the nation as a community imagined – to be imagined as a community in time and space, which is a kind of creation to the extent that as long as its members feel connected to each other, despite that they don’t know each other or that they often don’t even look alike [Anderson 1983: 6].

Considerations on the moral capital of the 3SI cannot abstract from the question whether the Initiative exists at all, and if so, what it actually is. The

claim to the identity of the 3SI was formulated by introducing the neologism “Three Seas”. This term appeared, among others, during the speech of Polish President Andrzej Duda for the diplomatic corps in Kiev in 2016⁹. It replaced the names of the ABC countries (from the names of the Adriatic, Baltic and Black seas) or the Intermarium countries, which were often used interchangeably. Intermarium, a pre-II world war Polish idea associated with the idea of Józef Piłsudski, was often indicated as one of the main sources of the contemporary concept of the Three Seas, which was sometimes questioned whether it was not a vehicle primarily for Polish national and even neo-imperial interests. Nevertheless, moral capital of the Initiative could be searched for in the feeling of achieved geopolitical maturity and a break with moral status assigned by others for the one shaped by their own. The 3SI space would be a space of the countries, within the European Union, talking about themselves using their own political language of self-interest and not being an object defined by external actors.

It is worth noting though, to what extent the ongoing war in Ukraine has influenced this moral narrative approach within the Initiative. It is still a dominating narrative in Poland. In recent years, the 3SI has gone through the slow process of constructing it as a collective entity. The situation has dramatically changed since February 2022 and Russian invasion of Ukraine. This made it possible to cast oneself in the role of a hero who defends Ukraine against Russia’s invasion and the passivity of the EU, especially Germany and France. Even if never before there was no question of the 3SI as an area of community of interests, the logic of the current political situation in the European Union and on the Eastern flank of NATO resulted in the emergence of a community of interests and a community of Central and Eastern Europe states threatened by Russia. It became a new, strongly resonant tone the common experience of disappointment among the 3SI countries - especially Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia - as they have been neglected and treated patronizingly for years regarding, i.e. the approach to the Nord Stream gas pipeline.¹⁰ And these are the countries that reacted to the 2022 war decisively, but completely different than Western countries, which largely took a more wait-and-see attitude (at least at the

⁹ See: <https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/opinie/artykuly/530239,trojmorze-rosnie-dzieki-wspolpracy-z-rumunia-i-chorwacja.html> [accessed: 25.03.2024].

¹⁰ A gap that has been existing in recent decade or so between Polish calls for Common European Energy Policy solidarity and Germany-Russian Project of Nordstream 2 pipeline.

beginning of the conflict). The unyielding, common attitude of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, supported by the Czech Republic and Slovenia, and basically all other 3SI countries, (apart from Hungary and Austria), it was so convincing that it allowed (and this is a rare moment in history!) to impose canons of behavior on the West in relation to this war, setting the boundaries of what is moral and what is not. As a consequence, the war allowed the 3SI countries to cast the East (Russia) as the perpetrators, the West (Germany, France), which was looking for neutral solutions, as at least accomplices or passive observers, and themselves as the heroes. Shortly, the narrative is as follows: If the West is to recover from its moral decline, it must convert, and its conversion must be a recognition narrative of the 3SI countries. In this sense they appear as the depository of Western morality. Conversion of the West is in fact a return to Central Europe. In this way, perhaps the 3SI will be able to go beyond its postcolonial paradox and polarization between East and West, showing that it is the “moral epicentre”, and that the Central Europe was right.¹¹

The 3SI should also be analyzed throughout the dimension of power and hard-core security issues ensuring the possibility of survival and development. Namely, through the realist paradigm. In the theory of realism, the key assumptions are a pessimistic vision of human nature and the belief in the conflictual nature of international relations, based on competition and the threat of war. The greatest importance is attached to state security. The key concept explaining the motives of states' actions is the category of power, which is the basis for defining the national interest

¹¹ There was one more important element in the mutual “superior/inferior morality narrative” when it comes to the war in Ukraine. In the early 2022 the major western European countries considered a rebellion of the European “periphery” in relation to the war in Ukraine, i.e. the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This approach can be explained by their attitude to the region: the task of the latter since the beginning of EU membership was “only” to provide cheap labor, to be the terrain of German and French penetration of capital in return for westernization and a modernization economic package with axiological content (in accordance with the binding neoliberal paradigm). Neither the Germans nor the French wanted the states of Central and Eastern Europe to impose much in “their” EU, that is, EU policy in these turbulent regional and global tectonic movements. Since the “periphery” is disobedient, there has been an obvious frustration among the leading EU countries. This is why, inter alia, we talk about deep structural crisis in the EU and a lack of a unified vision of the further development of the Union.

[Snyder 2004: 52]. In an anarchic international environment, over which no superior authority is exercised, the basic entities are states that undertake rational actions motivated by national interest [Legro, Moravcsik 1999: 5]. Realism explains that international cooperation is understood in the context of struggling for the interests of states. Seen from this perspective, the process of European integration profoundly modifies the environment in which the struggle for power takes place. The European Union brings about a change in the conditions of competition, but this does not negate the basic assumption of classical realism – the role of national interest as a universal force driving international relations. The 3SI, in the light of the theory of realism, can be considered an example of international cooperation resulting from a strong pursuit of maximum satisfaction of the interests of the states that create it and compete with each other. Basically, the motives for establishing cooperation are explained in two ways [Borkowski 2007: 58]. Firstly, cooperation occurs when states are united by a limited common interest and at the same time respect each other's national interests, and when the potential benefits outweigh the losses caused by the partial limitation of sovereignty. What matters most in cooperation is relative, not absolute, profits. What is important is the influence on changing the balance of power on the international stage, which means that those in power, when assessing the possibilities of economic cooperation, do not consider whether a given country will benefit from it at all, but try to determine whether they will gain more from it than other countries. It is important to emphasize the primacy of the political sphere over the economic sphere, because for political reasons states may withdraw even from very beneficial economic projects. Secondly, cooperation occurs when the distribution of power in a given group results in the emergence of a hegemon that can pursue particular national interests by imposing on others or convincing them that these are common interests. This cooperation may be effective, but it will depend on the interests of the dominant state.

Various events taking place at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century were consistent with the pessimistic vision of the Hobbesian world. Among them, it is worth emphasizing the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and a war with Ukraine. The sense of security that prevailed in Central and Eastern Europe after the enlargement of the EU and NATO was giving way to fears related to the emerging new order. The Euro-Atlantic system, which is the pillar of the security of the countries in this region, has faced serious challenges. This is the exact time when the 3SI appeared on the scene. From the perspective of realism, the activity of superpowers, in particular the USA, Russia and regionally – Germany, is important for

understanding the motives for cooperation between the countries creating the Three Seas Initiative. The United States, of course, is not and will not be a member of this new project, but it shows great interest in it. According to the assumptions of neoclassical realism [Waltz 1979], the source of this involvement can be found in the pursuit of maximizing influence. In competition at the global level, the initiative may be a tool for long-term strengthening of the US position in this part of the world. Central and Eastern Europe is an important area in strategic terms because, on the one hand, it neighbors Russia, which openly undermines the unipolar order and strives to build a multipolar world, and, on the other, Germany, which, after unification in 1990, has been systematically strengthening its position. Referring to Modelski's theory of hegemonic cycles, which is based on the assumptions of realism, one can notice phenomena that are part of the phase of delegitimizing the position of the United States. In the game of changing the world order from unipolar to multipolar, potential rivals of the hegemon try, on the one hand, to benefit from the still existing system, and on the other, to undermine it. None of the Central and Eastern European countries is a potential rival of the USA nor aspires to the role of a world power, which from Washington's perspective increases the attractiveness of this region.

Economic cooperation in the theory of realism is allowed provided that it does not lead to a relative increase in the power of another country, which may turn from a partner into an opponent in the future. It cannot be a factor in an unfavorable change in the balance of power. Cooperation with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe does not carry such a risk for the USA, because it is a highly politically fragmented region, including small and medium-sized countries that do not have their own significant gas deposits, but use large amounts of it. Americans are intensively looking for customers for liquefied gas (LNG), so this gives them a chance to conquer new markets and block the influence of potential competitors. Interestingly, in 2016 analysts warned that half of American LNG projects were at risk of closure within five years if they did not find new contractors and eliminate Qatari and Russian competition from Europe.¹² The implementation of large infrastructure projects – such as the expansion of the LNG terminal in Świnoujście, the construction of a terminal on the Croatian island of Krk, the construction of north-south transport connections, gas and oil pipelines – would facilitate the transmission of raw materials, also affecting the level of

¹² Forbes on-line: www.forbes.com/sites/judeclemente/2016/05/15/six-threats-for-the-u-s-liquefied-natural-gas-business/#448f00413a1b [accessed: 22.3.2024]

energy security of Central and Eastern Europe. From Russia's point of view, this was an action against its vital interests. It also complicated Germany's plans to become a Central European gas hub. In the case of the USA, the potential benefits from such trade could lead to the strengthening of its economic power. In realism, material factors included in hard power are the central category among the determinants of power. Nowadays, the economic potential of the state as an element of power is gaining in importance.

In the theory of realism, security is strongly emphasized. In a rigid hierarchy of goals, survival and strengthening security become the primary goals. The strengthening of security is relative, i.e. it is always assessed in comparison to the capabilities of other countries. The key to explaining their actions in the international arena are the current conditions - the balance of power. Realism emphasizes the possibility of conflict and the threat of war in international relations. For Central and Eastern Europe, the growing uncertainty about the behavior of other countries (especially Russia) and the EU's weakness in terms of security and defense are important. Although the 3SI focuses on infrastructure projects, it is also of great political importance, especially for increasing the importance of Central and Eastern Europe in the EU, developing cooperation with the USA and improving energy security. This aspect has gained significance particularly after the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014 and doubtless after February 2022 after which the existing security architecture in the region has been seriously damaged. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe differ in their assessment of threats and interests in their policy towards Russia. Some of them - especially Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and Romania - see the Kremlin's actions as a threat. Others, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia, emphasize the positive aspects of economic and energy relations with Moscow, but do not break away from the common European front of sanctions against Russia and do not oppose the strengthening of NATO's Eastern flank. Despite some differences, concerns about potential threats encourage the countries of Central and Eastern Europe to strengthen ties with the United States. Their main goal is not to maximize power, as in the case of the USA, but to maximize security, which is emphasized by neorealism.

With regard to the European Union, the 3SI can be perceived in two ways - as a factor of integrating or disintegrating the Union. From the perspective of neorealism, the establishment of this project can be considered a solution to strengthen the entire EU in the changing international order. The 3SI could become a factor consolidating the Union in a conflicted,

competitive world. Realism sees the pursuit of competition at the global level as the main driving force of integration and explanation of the processes taking place within the EU. The Three Seas Initiative could therefore support the Community in its competition with other economic and political centers: China, Japan, Russia, Turkey, the USA, etc. However, if the Union's goal was to compete with the US on the global stage, the Americans would have no interest in strengthening it by supporting the Three Seas Initiative. It is also difficult to answer the question of which political preferences of the strongest country should be reflected in the Three Seas. The most powerful EU countries, Germany and France, initially distanced themselves from this initiative, and Berlin's later attempt to join it raised fears that it might dominate this format, and has so far been unsuccessful. If we consider Poland to be the strongest country in this group, then it should be said that compared to Central and Eastern Europe, its potential is significant, but compared to Germany, France, Turkey or Russia - much weaker. Given the current balance of power, Poland has no way of persuading several countries in the region to cooperate if it would be against the interests of the major powers. However, the emergence of the 3SI can also be explained differently - as a factor disintegrating the EU, or rather strengthening the disintegration processes affecting the weakening Union, which would limit its ability to compete with the USA. This is consistent with the opinions that the 3SI is to be a political competition for the old European Union, a counterweight to Brussels, Berlin and Paris, and even a step towards establishing an alternative, Central European structure after the collapse of the EU. This would be a step towards increasing the role of the Central and Eastern European countries as a consolidated bloc, but at the expense of the EU. Some realists scholars such as John Mearsheimer predicted the imminent decline of the integration process already in the early 1990s, when the threat of the USSR disappeared [Mearsheimer 1990: 5-56]. Initially, it seemed that this would not happen, as integration was deepening dynamically, but after two decades the EU found itself in a deep crisis. The internal problems of the European Union are accompanied by the strengthening of the role of nation states. In classical, state-centric realism, international relations are based on relationships between sovereign states that retain full control over their populations, territories, and internal resources. Therefore, the Three Seas Initiative can be perceived in this sense as a step towards turning away from the integration model towards intergovernmental cooperation, shaped by traditional foreign policy channels. This would explain why the key role in this format is played by

the highest representatives of the states, why no treaty has been adopted and no steps have been taken to institutionalize this cooperation.

Conclusions

Regardless of whether we observe the 3SI in terms of its economic, political or geopolitical dimensions, there is no question that it is an effort of the states of the Central and Eastern Europe to overcome geopolitical fatalism of the region and escape from peripheral position in Europe. We must acknowledge that after February 24 2022 and Russian invasion of Ukraine major vectors in international politics (and economy) have deeply changed. This includes the Three Seas Initiative as well.

The liberal paradigm narrative layer of the last 30 years is becoming a thing of the past. In other words, it is no longer a useful explanatory tool. This includes, *inter alia*, the narrative of globalism and the narrative of the primacy of values in politics. We witness the return of the balance of power narrative, return to industrial policy, return to protectionism, narrative about protecting one's own civilization.¹³ When it comes to security issues we need to conclude that there is no shared pan-European identity. This EU narrative is a fiction because there will always be differences in threat perception in Europe. It is important to understand that in the near future the USA will withdraw from the paradigm of domination to the paradigms of selective engagement and off-shore balancing. The question remains whether Poland, together with its partners in the Three Seas Initiative will be able to adapt to the new security reality in Europe. This will have a significant impact on the remaining dimensions of cooperation mentioned in this paper. It will also decide about the success or a failure of the Three Seas idea in this part of Europe.

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¹³ Another words, we need more Huntington and less narratives about globalization.

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