

[Visit Web](#)

[Receive Newsletter](#)

48/2021

26/04/2021

Óscar Méndez Pérez*

**The Three Seas Initiative:
Configuration and Global
Geopolitical Consequences**

The Three Seas Initiative: Configuration and Global Geopolitical Consequences

Abstract:

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) is an alliance of Central and Eastern European countries located among the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas. Its objectives focus on achieving an interconnected region, with a north-south approach, in the fields of energy, infrastructure and telecommunications. At the same time, it has an eminent geopolitical component that not only can be felt in the region, but that also involves the four major world powers: the US, Russia, China and the European Union.

Keywords:

Three Seas Initiative, geopolitics, Central and Eastern Europe, energy, infrastructures, telecommunications.

How to quote:

MÉNDEZ PÉREZ, Óscar. *The Three Seas Initiative: Configuration and Global Geopolitical Consequences*. Opinion Paper. IEEE 48/2021.
http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2021/DIEEEO48_2021_OSCMEN_Tresmares_ENG.pdf and/or [link bie](#)³ (accessed on the web day/month/year)

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

Introduction

The Three Seas Initiative (TSI) is a collaborative platform between Poland, Croatia, Austria, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Czech Republic, and Romania. These countries form a region in Central and Eastern Europe that lies among three seas: the Baltic, the Black and the Adriatic. Its objectives have been defended by its promoters, the Polish president, and the Croatian president¹, based exclusively on the desire of the countries in the area to prosper together with a north-south vision instead of an east-west vision, which is how their communication routes and trade networks are currently configured². Therefore, the 12 Central and Eastern European countries agreed to develop various road, rail, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure projects. Thus, the 3SI aims to improve European cohesion, while several of the participating countries are seeking to put some distance between the region and the Russian influence it exerts through the gas exports. This is to the liking of the Americans, who have supported the initiative from the beginning³ together with the approval of the rest of countries of the region that seek to strengthen Atlantic relations, not only between them and the USA, but also between Europe and America in general. Although I have tried to showcase the 3SI as a place of collaboration, it has also become an initiative where the struggles for power and influence of the world powers crystallize, with Russia, China, the US, and the European Union paying close attention to the movements that take place in it.

Configuration and Design of the Three Seas Initiative

In terms of its geographical configuration, the Intermarium (Latin for "between seas") project is the most obvious foundation for the 3SI. This alliance, developed by inter-war Polish Marshal and President Josef Piłsudski, was aimed to unite the region from Finland in the north, across to the Baltic countries, Belarus, Ukraine, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia. With this federation, Poland and the entire area would escape the domination

¹ ALTARAS Penda, I. "Three Seas Initiative: Between Diplomacy and Geopolitics", *Acta Economica Et Turistica*, 4(1), 2018, pp. 5-34. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/aet-2018-0002>

² KUREČIĆ, P. "The three seas initiative: Geographical determinants, geopolitical foundations, and prospective challenges", *Hrvatski Geografski Glasnik*, 80(1), 2018, pp. 99-124. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.21861/HGG.2018.80.01.05>

³ SIERADZKA, M. "Europe's 'Three Seas Initiative' aims to curb Chinese influence", *DW.Com*, 2020.

of the two regional powers that sought to control them, Germany and Russia. However, his project failed due to Poland's poor relations with its neighbouring countries such as Lithuania and Czechoslovakia, as well as to the lack of support from a real foreign power⁴.

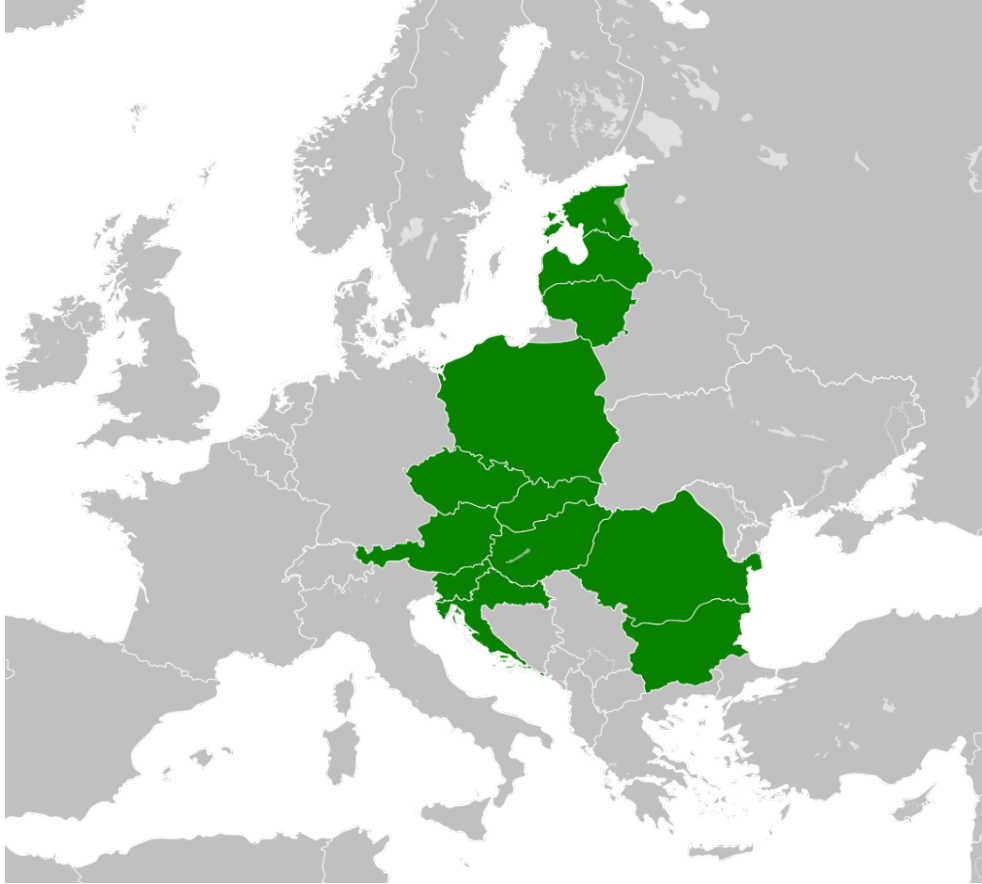


Figure 1. The Three Seas Initiative in the European Context. Source. Wikicommons.

Currently, macroeconomic data show a clear gap between Eastern and Western Europe, both in terms of living standards, GDP, infrastructure, demographics, etc. Despite having a population close to 111 million people (almost 22% of the total European population) and a territory covering 28% of the European Union's soil⁵, 2018 figures show that the countries of this region barely account for the 10% of the European GDP and that their average GDP per capita is only 78% of that of the EU.

The countries participating in the Three Seas Initiative share the same main objectives: economic growth, security, and a stronger and more cohesive Europe. In order to achieve

⁴ CRETU, V., & ARDELEANU, D. "The Revival Of The Intermarium Geopolitical Project – The Three Seas – The Three Seas Initiative and Bucharest 9 Format", *Security Paradigms in the 21st Century*, 2018, pp. 19-20, pp. 331-344.

⁵ SIERADZKA, M. "Europe's 'Three Seas Initiative' aims to curb Chinese influence", *DW.Com*, 2020.

this, they intend to promote the region's economic growth and welfare by attracting foreign investment. Besides, they declared energy security as one of their main objectives at the same time they attempt to achieve climate goals and reduce carbon emissions. In addition, the need to develop digital infrastructures and create intelligent solutions for a more efficient use of information has been highlighted.

The 3SI initiative has multiple objectives, although they focus on three main areas: energy, infrastructure, and telecommunications⁶. In this regard, abandoning the dependency on Russian energy is one of the main objectives in the field of energy, with Poland and Croatia completing the construction of regasification plants to import gas⁷, which would provide them with energy independence from a power that some of the countries in the region consider a threat⁸. However, this is not a unanimous position within the initiative. Hungary or Bulgaria seems to be more in cheap energy⁹ rather than in energy independence. At the same time, several gas pipelines running from north to south are currently under construction. The flagship project of the 3SI is linking the LNG regasification ports in Croatia and Poland through a pipeline that will pass through some Central European countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia or Hungary. On the other hand, Romania—often being left out from several of the north-south projects because of its location—has presented its own gas projects.

It is also important to consider the possibility of promoting the construction of nuclear power plants, which would allow greater independence from Russian energy and compliance with the emission reduction programs proposed by the European Union¹⁰.

Another key point of this initiative is the development of north-south land transport infrastructures¹¹, combining highway, railway, and nautical projects. The most important

⁶ TSONEV, B. "Iniciativa Tres Mares. Su significado y posibles consecuencias geopolíticas", *14 Milímetros*, 2020. Available at: <https://14milimetros.com/iniciativa-tres-mares-su-significado-y-posibles-consecuencias-geopoliticas>

⁷ BRZEZINSKI, I., & KORANYI, D. "The Three Seas Summit: A Step Toward Realizing the Vision of a Europe Whole, Free, and at Peace?", *The Atlanticist*, 2017.

⁸ ALBRYCHT, I., DUJMOVIĆ, K. A., KAUSHIK, A., & KONKEL, A. "The Digital 3 Seas Initiative", *Kosciuszko Institute*, 2018.

⁹ GÓRKA, M. "The three seas initiative as a political challenge for the countries of central and eastern Europe", *Politics in Central Europe*, 14(3), 2018, pp. 55-73. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2018-0018>

¹⁰ "Poland to seek EU approval for state aid to build nuclear plant", *Euractiv.com*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/poland-to-seek-eu-approval-for-state-aid-to-build-nuclear-plant/>

¹¹ CELAC, S., & EBERHARDT, A. "The Emergence of a European Project", *Three Summits for the Three Seas Initiative*, 2018.

highway project is Via Carpathia, which will connect Thessaloniki (Greece) with Klaipėda (Lithuania); as for railroads, Via Baltica will connect Warsaw with Helsinki, making Poland a leading transport hub in the region¹². Finally, various river transport initiatives are also planned. At the geopolitical level, the main one is the E40 Inland Waterway, which would connect the Baltic coast in Poland with the Black Sea in Romania, running through Belarus and Ukraine.

In addition, the Three Seas Initiative is set out to define regional connectivity and telecommunications plans. This part of the project includes technology such as optical fibre, broadcasting and especially a plan for the implementation of 5G¹³. The 3SI is going to develop the Three Seas Digital Highway, a series of projects aimed to improve data transfer and communications infrastructure, including 5G technology and fibre optic networks. It also intends to bring forward the 3SI Marketplace, a regional marketplace to boost trade and drive investments in the area. Finally, the Smart City Forum has been established and is seeking to accelerate innovation and encourage investment in innovation in regional cities¹⁴.

So far, only 3% of the projects have been completed and only 15% have made substantial progress¹⁵. International summits have been limited to one per year since the first one in 2016, including a telematic one in 2020 because of COVID-19. Moreover, the 3SI considers that over the next 10 years €800 billion in investments will be needed to carry out the projects. However, the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund has barely raised €1.3 billion from the €5 billion they were set out to¹⁶, despite the commitment made by the US to invest 30% of the combined contribution of the 12 3SI countries up to \$1 billion¹⁷.

¹² CRETU, V., & ARDELEANU, D. "The Revival Of The Intermarium Geopolitical Project – The Three Seas – The Three Seas Initiative and Bucharest 9 Format", *Security Paradigms in the 21st Century*, 2018, pp. 19-20, pp. 331-344

¹³ GÓRKA, M. "The three seas initiative as a political challenge for the countries of central and eastern Europe", *Politics in Central Europe*, 14(3), 2018, pp. 55-73. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2018-0018>

¹⁴ GARDING, S. E., & Mix, D. E. "The Three Seas Initiative", *CRS Reports*, 2020. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov>

¹⁵ THOMANN, P. "The Three Seas Initiative: a New Project at the Heart of European and Global Geographical Rivalries", *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, 17(3), 2019, pp. 31-65. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov>

¹⁶ GOSLING, T. "Navigating the Three Seas Initiative", *Balkan Insight*, 2020. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/30/navigating-the-three-seas-initiative/>

¹⁷ DZIEWIAŁTOWSKI-GINTOWT, B. "One Belt, One Road Between Three Seas: Chinas's Soft-power Policy Towards "New" EU Members", *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, 17(3), 2019, pp. 93-

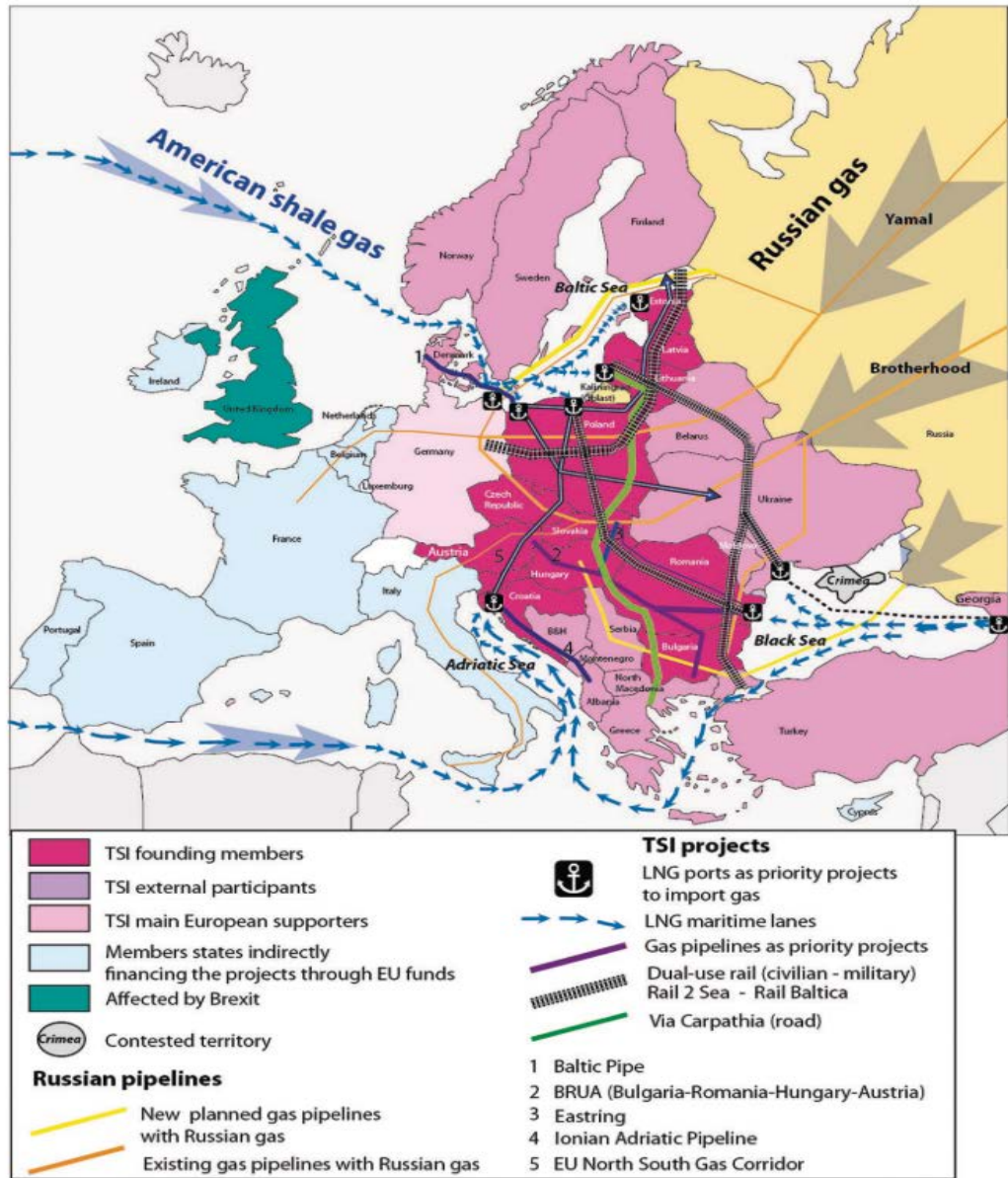


Figure 2. Main infrastructure projects of the Three Seas Initiative. Source. Thomann (2019).

Global Geopolitical Implications

China

China sees Central and Eastern Europe as a strategic area in which to invest its capital surpluses through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI is focused on establishing a "New Eurasian Land Bridge" corridor, which directly affects the Three Seas region by

connecting China with Madrid through Poland. With this situation in mind, and looking for regionalized markets, China proposed the creation of an informal and flexible platform with the 16 Central and Eastern European countries, which was later expanded to 17 including Greece.

Under this project, in 2015 the Chinese Prime Minister encouraged the countries of the region to increase cooperation in the area between the three seas, while the Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs stressed that both initiatives were highly compatible and that he considered that they pursued identical objectives¹⁸. The Eastern European region is essential to connect China's market with that of Western Europe and therefore, we must consider that China's main objective in Central and Eastern Europe is not to divide the EU —as some analysts might consider^{19,20}—, but to rather use this region as a platform to increase its trade with Western Europe. For China it is beneficial to have more countries in the EU, as this will give them access to a larger and more dynamic market.

At the same time, China's interest has been welcomed by the countries of the region, since China offers easy and fast money²¹, especially aimed at energy, renewable energies and infrastructure²², aspects in which the 3SI is most interested, and which would help to develop and improve the connectivity of the area. These infrastructure improvements would also present the Eastern European market as more attractive to investors from other countries different than China, including Europe²³.

Notwithstanding this, China's sights are set on Central European countries, mainly Germany, whose largest trading partner over traditional allies such as France and the United States is China²⁴. In any case, when we analyse the economic data and trade

¹⁸ DZIEWIAŁTOWSKI-GINTOWT, B. "One Belt, One Road Between Three Seas: China's Soft-power Policy Towards "New" EU Members", *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, 17(3), 2019, pp. 93-115.

¹⁹ HILLMAN, J.; MCCALPIN, M. "Will China's '16+1' Format Divide Europe?", CSIS, 2019. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/will-chinas-161-format-divide-europe>

²⁰ GASPERIS, J. "Divide and Rule", *Berlin Policy Journal*, 2018. Available at: <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/divide-and-rule/>

²¹ PEPERMANS, A. "China's 16+1 and Belt and Road Initiative in Central and Eastern Europe: economic and political influence at a cheap price", *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 26(2–3), 2018, pp. 181-203. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2018.1515862>

²² Ibidem, p. 4.

²³ MOZGIN, W. "The Three Seas Initiative: An Aspect of Contemporary Geopolitical Competition for Dominance in Europe", *Ante Portas - Studia Nad Bezpieczeństwem*, 13(2), 2019, pp. 45-61. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.33674/20193>

²⁴ MORRIS, D. "What the rest of Asia thinks about China's Belt and Road Initiative", *Lowy Institute*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/three-seas-initiative-european-answer-china-s-belt-and-road>

balances between the countries of the region and China, we see that the countries in the area are increasing imports of Chinese products, while exports, although they have increased, have not increased at the same pace and now the countries of Eastern Europe have a negative trade balance²⁵.

If we assess the scarce Chinese investments in infrastructure that have been carried out so far from a geopolitical point of view, we see that they intend to connect the infrastructures of their project to BRI with Western Europe, and mainly Germany. For example, to connect the port of Piraeus with Central Europe, China has funded the construction of the high-speed railroad between Belgrade and Budapest²⁶, from where the goods will reach the dry port of Duisburg (Germany) via Austria.

Russia

Even though its economic weight is very low in the 3SI countries and the founders of the initiative claim not to act against any specific country²⁷, Russia does not look favourably on the 3SI. One of the main objectives of the initiative is to reduce the region's energy dependence on Russian gas. This would not only eliminate a method of influence in the region (which is exercised through threats] to cut off supplies to the countries in the area) but also, from a more direct point of view, would mean a decrease in the Russian revenues generated by the sale of this resource.

In this regard, 3SI countries have agreed on several measures to reduce dependence on Russian gas. For Russia, 3SI's boosting of LNG imports from the US is a problem. Not only because it may lose part of its market, but also because it is doing so in favour of one of its global rivals. To make the switch to American LNG, the necessary infrastructure has been built in Croatia and Poland²⁸, which will be connected by a gas pipeline constructed within the framework of the 3SI. In the meantime, Russia counteracted with

²⁵ PEPE, J. M. "China's Inroads into Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe: Implications for Germany and the EU", *DGAP-ANALYSE* (Issue 3), 2017.

²⁶ PEPERMANS, A. "China's 16+1 and Belt and Road Initiative in Central and Eastern Europe: economic and political influence at a cheap price", *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 26(2-3), 2018, pp. 181-203. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2018.1515862>

²⁷ ALTARAS PENDA, I. "Three Seas Initiative: Between Diplomacy and Geopolitics", *Acta Economica Et Turistica*, 4(1), 2018, pp. 5-34. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/aet-2018-0002>

²⁸ KUREČIĆ, P. "The three seas initiative: Geographical determinants, geopolitical foundations, and prospective challenges", *Hrvatski Geografski Glasnik*, 80(1), 2018, pp. 99-124. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.21861/HGG.2018.80.01.05>

the construction of the various gas pipelines linking its territory with Turkey across the Black Sea.

Therefore, Russia has looked for other options to supply gas to Europe²⁹ and the countries in the area are still looking for real alternatives. On the short run, a big change doesn't seem likely, as the infrastructures that the 3SI countries need to build are costly and time-consuming, whether they are gas pipelines, LNG ports or nuclear power plants. In the long term, the progressive reduction of Russian gas imports should simply happen because the EU has proposed to be CO₂ neutral by 2050³⁰, and in the next 30 years an effort for renewable energies should be made.

On the other hand, another danger of the 3SI for Russia is the possible increase of Poland's influence capabilities in the countries around it and the possibility that these countries which it has good relations, especially Bulgaria and Hungary, may change its opinion or perspective about the Russian Federation.

As for the first case, the Polish government feels prepared to exercise its leadership in the region based on its economic, geographic, and demographic size. This has been demonstrated with its involvement in the conflicts and protests in Ukraine and Belarus, which would take up on the Prometheanism project, also by Piłsudski³¹. Furthermore, it is noteworthy to remember the importance within the Polish political construct of the time when Poland was part of the Republic of the Two Nations (1569-1795), also known as the First Polish Republic, and which formed it together with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the territories that today correspond to Poland, the Baltic countries, Ukraine and Belarus. With this background, it is possible to observe a possible expansionist project of the Polish foreign policy, trying to alienate Russia, seeking foreign support to create its own political space in the EU, as well as trying to influence countries in the area such as Belarus and Ukraine. In addition to the Three Seas Initiative, Poland also has a role in the Lublin Triangle, a cooperation framework in different fields, formed by Poland itself,

²⁹ ARAGONÉS, G. "Rusia empieza a enviar gas al sur de Europa sin Ucrania", *La Vanguardia*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20200103/472675408518/envio-gas-rusia-europa-ucrania-rutas-bulgaria.html>

³⁰ DE MIGUEL, B. "La UE pacta el objetivo de reducir a cero las emisiones en 2050", *El País*, 2019. Available at: https://elpais.com/sociedad/2019/12/12/actualidad/1576162916_747579.html

³¹ Plan designed by Piłsudski, the aim of which was to weaken the Russian Empire and its successor states, including the USSR, by supporting nationalist independence movements among the non-Russian peoples inhabiting within Russia and the Soviet Union.

Ukraine and Lithuania and announced in 2020³².

As for the second point, not all countries in the initiative hold the same view towards Russia. There are two quite clear groups: the group of the "New Cold War Warriors" — Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Croatia (after their change of policy in 2015) —versus the "Pragmatists" group— formed by Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia and so called due to their more left-handed policy and better economic and political relations with Russia because of their dependence on Russian gas³³. Thus, countries in the region are torn between pragmatism and a hard line against Russia. However, although it may be difficult to happen, a change in the medium term with respect to this view of Russia cannot be ruled out.

United States

With Donald Trump's election as President in 2016, a major confrontation with Russia was avoided, as Hillary Clinton had displayed a much more anti-Russian rhetoric than her rival³⁴. Nevertheless, the new president played both cards, attacking Russia when he felt it necessary³⁵ but meeting with President Putin to show his willingness for dialogue and appeasement³⁶.

While this cycle of permanent tension and détente with Russia continued, Trump went on the attack against the European Union, defining the EU as one of United States' biggest foes³⁷. Meanwhile, the EU not only had to answer these grievances, but at the same time had to put out the open fires within itself: on the one hand Brexit and on the other hand the attacks to the values of the Union launched through their veto power and their statements by the presidents and prime ministers of the Eastern countries, mainly those

³² BORNIO, J. "Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine Inaugurate 'Lublin Triangle'", James Town, 2020. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/lithuania-poland-and-ukraine-inaugurate-lublin-triangle/>

³³ KUREČIĆ, P. "The three seas initiative: Geographical determinants, geopolitical foundations, and prospective challenges", *Hrvatski Geografski Glasnik*, 80(1), 2018, pp. 99-124. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.21861/HGG.2018.80.01.05>

³⁴ SANGER, D. E. "The Hawk on Russia Policy? Hillary Clinton, Not Donald Trump", *NY Times*, 2016. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/21/us/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-putin-russia.html>

³⁵ "Kremlin says new U.S. sanctions are hostile act by outgoing Trump administration", *Reuters*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-usa-sanctions-kremlin-idUSKBN28W11Q>

³⁶ TAYLOR, A. "Trump and Putin have had 16 or more private conversations. Here's what we know", *Washington Post*, 2019. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/04/trump-has-spoken-privately-with-putin-least-times-heres-what-we-know-about-conversations/>

³⁷ CONTIGUGLIA, C. "Trump: EU is one of United States' biggest foes", *Politico.eu*, 2018. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-putin-russia-europe-one-of-united-states-biggest-foes/>

of the Visegrad Club³⁸.

In the eyes of the Trump administration, the 3SI is the perfect conjunction to address these situations. The initiative attacks Russian gas sales, with which it finances its geopolitical power and military capabilities. At the same time, the 3SI represents an interesting market in which to place its gas resources, which has a direct impact on American economic growth. On the other hand, it recovers its presence in Eastern Europe, where the US has a better image than in Western Europe³⁹. In this way, the administration was giving a warning, linked to competitive rhetoric against the EU and Germany: if Europeans do not act as Americans want, they have the capacity to divide the EU through diplomacy and economics. Their main ally for this tactic is Poland, who is looking for a way to exert power in the region. With this situation, the US finds in Poland a new preferential ally within the EU^{40,41} after the departure of the traditional American partner, the UK.

To show his interest in the initiative, American President Donald Trump personally attended the 2017 3SI Summit in Warsaw in 2017, where he supported the initiative while vehemently attacking Germany for its Nord Stream 2⁴² joint project with Russia. In this sense, and to show unequivocal support, the US announced the sale of liquefied gas to the countries in the area and economical support for the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund⁴³. On the other hand, the sale of nuclear technology for \$18 billion⁴⁴ was agreed with Poland collaboration agreement worth \$8 billion for the construction of two nuclear reactors was signed with Romania. Thus, in the energy field, the US intends to close off the entry of Chinese investments while gradually undermining Russian power both in the

³⁸ KUREČIĆ, P. "The three seas initiative: Geographical determinants, geopolitical foundations, and prospective challenges", *Hrvatski Geografski Glasnik*, 80(1), 2018, pp. 99-124. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.21861/HGG.2018.80.01.05>

³⁹ POUŠTER, J. "How the world sees the U.S. and Trump in 10 charts", *Pew Research*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/01/08/how-people-around-the-world-see-the-u-s-and-donald-trump-in-10-charts/>

⁴⁰ ZIEBA, R. "Poland's Foreign and Security Policy", *Springer*, 2020.

⁴¹ SIERADZKA, M. "Poland: More aligned to US than to European partners?", *Deutsche Welle*, 2019. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/poland-more-aligned-to-us-than-to-european-partners/a-50232484>

⁴² ZBIŃKOWSKI, G. "The Three Seas Initiative and its Economic and Geopolitical Effect on the European Union and Central and Eastern Europe" *Comparative Economic Research*, 22(2), 2019, pp. 105-119. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2478/cer-2019-0015>

⁴³ Departamento de Estado (2020a). *Secretary Pompeo Delivers Remarks at the Three Seas Initiative Virtual Summit Secretary Pompeo's Call with Republic of Cyprus Foreign Minister*.

⁴⁴ GARDNER, T. "U.S. sees \$18 billion from purchases in nuclear power agreement with Poland", *Reuters*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nuclearpower-poland-idUSKBN274239>

region and in the continent. However, there is still the thorny issue of Nord Stream 2 between Russia and Germany, which would prevent the US from increasing its energy influence in Central and Eastern Europe by making Germany the main energy hub in the region.

But in the American case we are not only talking about a world power, but also about a country that has been the closest to functioning as a true world hegemon. The dream of world domination and leadership maintenance has not disappeared from the American strategy⁴⁵, so the US strategy in the region has not been limited to energy and the 3SI, it has also brought open technological war with China. To this end, the Americans have promoted the Clean Network Initiative, which several 3SI countries joined, with the intention of putting Chinese technology out of play. However, it is not yet clear how the countries will manage this situation while continuing to participate in the 17+1 Forum. Moreover, it remains to be seen how this situation will be managed in the medium and long term, when the goal is to create an integrated and joint telecommunications infrastructure. Meanwhile, the US has opened fronts against the three major powers to compete with them through its role in the 3SI, something that, at least in the short term, is beneficial for the 3SI, which has gained the immediate support of a superpower.

European Union

We are currently witnessing various transformation processes of the international environment, going from a unipolar environment to a multipolar one. This situation is being replicated in the EU, where the centre is still dominated by Germany, but new power centres are emerging. In this regard, the 3SI can be seen as the attempt of Eastern European countries to break out with the centripetal force exerted by Germany (and, to some extent, Brussels). However, at the various 3SI Summits, the 3SI countries have been at pains to emphasize that all projects are intended to increase European cohesion⁴⁶. At the same time, the European Union has supported the 3SI, but in a

⁴⁵ THOMANN, P. "The Three Seas Initiative: a New Project at the Heart of European and Global Geographical Rivalries", *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, 17(3), 2019, pp. 31-65. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov>

⁴⁶ ALTARAS PENDA, I. "Three Seas Initiative: Between Diplomacy and Geopolitics", *Acta Economica Et Turistica*, 4(1), 2018, pp. 5-34. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/aet-2018-0002>

lukewarm manner and its interest has only increased since the Summit in Romania in 2018⁴⁷.

It might also be the case that the combination of the reinforcement of the north-south union structures of central and eastern European countries with the existing west-east structures may strengthen German capabilities in the region, thus producing not a European division between "old" and "new" Europe but between the European core and its periphery⁴⁸. This situation would reinforce dynamics that already undermine the viability of the European Union. If the dynamism of the European core is further reinforced, the economic space left to the periphery will only deepen its macroeconomic imbalances, which will question its ability to maintain its welfare systems. In the medium term, this might have repercussions for the continuity of the euro and the European Union itself. Despite this, Germany, like Brussels, was no longer wary of the initiative and even asked to join the 3SI with the support of Poland⁴⁹. Although this seems unlikely to happen, Germany's role has been more proactive at recent summits.

At the same time, the European Union should be aware of the American support at the 3SI. This situation must be assessed from the European perspective of strategic autonomy. The European Union and its members must ask themselves whether they want to be fully independent in the international environment, to subsequently define how they are going to achieve this and re-evaluate who their allies should be. In this regard, during the Trump administration, the US considers Europe as a competitor⁵⁰. Therefore, for Europe, the US is a revisionist power in the international environment. In this sense, member countries must assess whether the American gas is better than the Russian gas at every level, including whether it is more appropriate to continue to rely on Russian gas in exchange for them relying on large sums of European money or whether it is better to avoid this and the US to be the one to provide it.

⁴⁷ CALHEIROS, B. "The 3 Seas Initiative: Geopolitics and Infrastructure", *JANUS.NET e-Journal of International Relations*, 10(2), 2020, pp. 110-123.

⁴⁸ PEPE, J. M. "China's Inroads into Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe: Implications for Germany and the EU", *DGAP-ANALYSE* (Issue 3), 2017.

⁴⁹ KORYBKO, A. "Germany's Request to Partner with the Three Seas Initiative Is a Win for Poland", *Global Research*, 2018. Available at: <https://www.globalresearch.ca/germanys-request-to-partner-with-the-three-seas-initiative-is-a-win-for-poland/5652168>

⁵⁰ COLSON, T. (2020). "Donald Trump says EU was formed to take advantage of United States", *Business Insider*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-says-european-union-formed-to-take-advantage-united-states-2020-7>

Continuing with the energy logic, the European Union must also take into account its own power dynamics and interests within the 3SI itself. Although Polish President Duda has reiterated that the 3SI is not aimed against any country, it seems clear that the program they intend to implement with the help of Croatia and the Baltic countries is one that is at odds with Russia. The European Union must be aware that, if they make progress in this regard, it is not out of the question that they will want to operate against Russia in other scenarios.

On the other hand, European countries must analyse the 3SI and its importance for Chinese geopolitics, as well as the relationship of the 12 member countries with the Asian country. Europe still defends a common policy towards China and is currently moving between the distrust (for instance, doubting if use Chinese 5G technology) and an interest in a huge market — Germany, which is the most interested country in maintaining good relations with China is aware of this. In the meantime, and with the lack of evidence that confirms the real dangers of using Chinese technology⁵¹, the 3SI countries must decide whether they are still interested in maintaining good relations with China to attract quick and easy money or whether they prefer a more tense relationship at the expense of the American support. While this is being decided, the EU will have to opt to divide its foreign policy strategy or to steer the 3SI countries towards a position closer to that of the EU, which is most likely flawed by the German policy towards the Asian country.

Conclusions

The Three Seas Initiative was conceived as a regional cohesion project in the area between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas. This geographical space is not accidental: it comprises 12 countries that share their belonging to the "other Europe", the European buffer zone between the German and Russian empires, the same region that the Pole Józef Piłsudski wanted to unite under his idea of Intermarium to avoid the threat of these powers.

The countries of the region feel that their needs have not been met and that there is a gap dividing Eastern and Western Europe. For them, part of the region's economic

⁵¹ MCLOUGHLIN, M. "La engañosa geopolítica del 5G: por qué librarse de Huawei en Europa no será fácil", *El Confidencial*, 2020. Available at: https://www.elconfidencial.com/tecnologia/2020-07-08/geopolitica-5g-huawei-europa_2670656/

problem stems from the geographic design of its infrastructures, as they extend from east to west and do not manage to properly connect and communicate the region, in contrast to Western Europe where they form a virtuous circle.

In order to solve this situation, these 12 countries have planned a series of projects focused on infrastructure and telecommunications that aim to unite the countries in the area, creating a situation that will improve the region's economic prospects and, at the same time, enhance European unity. However, despite its clear regional vision, the 3SI has attracted the interest of the four major world powers.

For China, the 3SI is the materialization of a proposal formulated by the Asian country's leaders, who see regional unity and the improvement of the region's infrastructures as an essential step to complete the connection of their BRI project.

On the other hand, the 3SI has been endowed with a clear geopolitical component against Russian energy power in the area, as it tries to find solutions to reduce dependence on gas imported from Russia. Despite this situation, Russia has little to lose in a region where most of the countries had no longer wished to have anything to do it, politically and ideologically.

The United States is the power that has shown the greatest support for the 3SI, even directly from its President Donald Trump. The US considers that this initiative is totally aligned with the American strategy for Europe: pressure on Russia, force the European Union and leave China out.

Finally, after overcoming their reticence, the EU and Germany have become more interested, and the German country has even applied to join the 3SI with Polish support. However, an excessively belligerent 3SI policy towards Russia may create unwanted clashes for Brussels. The special role reserved for the US in the 3SI, at a time when the transatlantic relationship is not at its best, may reinforce the pro-American/pro-European division. Finally, the anti-China policy advocated by the Americans in the region could affect EU-China relations, which may not be beneficial for the continent in general and Germany in particular.

*Óscar Méndez Pérez**

Trainee at the Council of Europe Office in Albania
Master's degree in Geopolitics and Strategic Studies