



THE THREE SEAS INITIATIVE: REGIONAL COOPERATION OR A MILITARY PROJECT FOR NEW EUROPE?

COBISS 1.01

DOI: 10.4312/dela.62.87-106

Abstract

The study examines the Three Seas Initiative as a geopolitical and geoeconomic platform in Central and Eastern Europe and asks whether its primary purpose is economic development or a military strategy. Using a comparative analysis of the economic and geopolitical dimensions, it concludes that while the Three Seas Initiative projects offer economic benefits, they primarily serve strategic military objectives. It emphasizes the role of Three Seas Initiative in strengthening NATO capabilities and its alignment with U.S. geopolitical priorities.

Keywords: Three Seas Initiative, Central and Eastern Europe, military infrastructure, European Isthmus, NATO, Russia, United States

POBUDA TREH MORIJ: REGIONALNO SODELOVANJE ALI VOJAŠKI PROJEKT ZA NOVO EVROPO?

Izvleček

Študija preučuje Pobudo treh morij kot geopolitično in geoekonomsko platformo v Srednji in Vzhodni Evropi. Postavlja vprašanje, ali je glavni namen pobude razvoj gospodarske ali geostrateške dimenzije. S primerjalno analizo ugotavlja, da infrastrukturni projekti Pobude treh morij, čeprav prinašajo gospodarske koristi, predvsem služijo strateškimi vojaškimi ciljem. Poudarja vlogo Pobude treh morij pri krepitvi zmogljivosti NATO in usklajenosti z geopolitičnimi interesi ZDA.

Ključne besede: Pobuda treh morij, Srednja in Vzhodna Evropa, vojaška infrastruktura, Evropska ožina, NATO, Rusija, ZDA

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) was established in 2016 by Poland and Croatia to enhance cooperation between Central and Eastern European countries. Its primary objectives are supposedly to address infrastructural disparities, promote economic growth, and strengthen regional security. The initiative encompasses thirteen member states of the European Union: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece (Figure 1). In addition, Ukraine and Moldova participate as partner participants (associate members), while the United States, the European Commission, Germany, and Japan serve as strategic partners, providing political and financial support. In 2019, the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund was established to finance key projects.

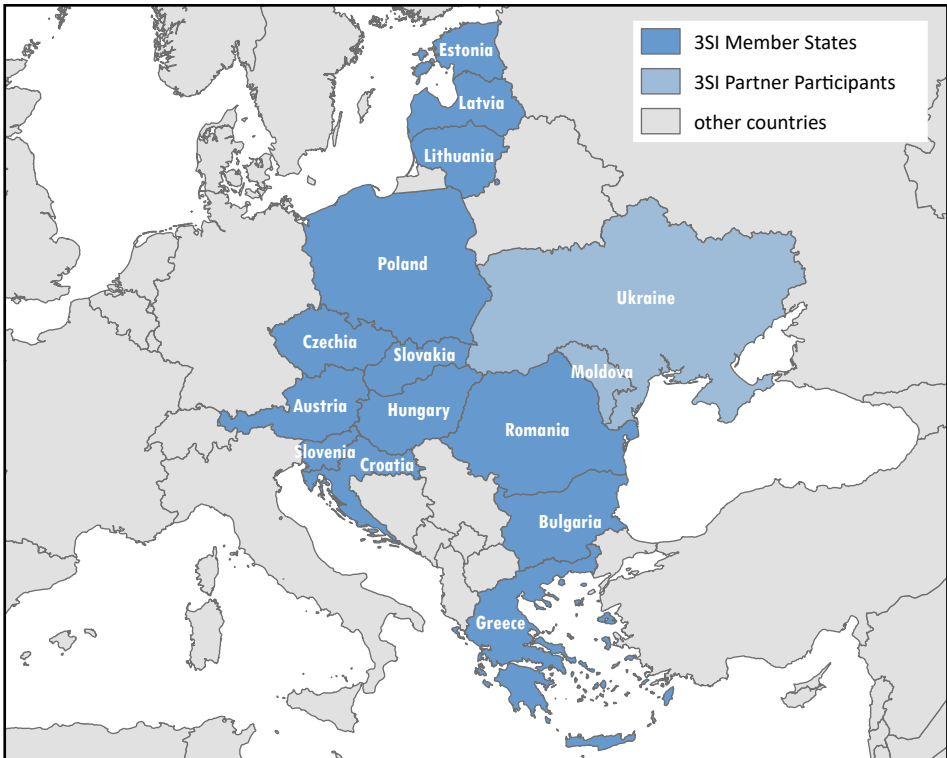
The organizational structure of the 3SI includes annual summits hosted by the member countries where strategic directions and priority projects are discussed. In parallel to these summits, there is a business forum that promotes exchanges between government representatives and the private sector. The Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund could play a crucial role in financing infrastructure projects that are in line with the initiative's objectives if its economic rationale were the central driving force behind its activities.

The 3SI framework is officially based on three pillars that are addressing the gaps in the region's infrastructure. First, the transportation infrastructure pillar focuses on the development of north-south corridors to improve connectivity. Projects such as Via Carpathia and Rail Baltica are intended to facilitate trade and mobility. The second pillar, energy infrastructure, aims to diversify energy sources and strengthen security, e.g. with initiatives such as LNG terminals in Poland and Croatia. Third, digital infrastructure pillar could enhance regional competitiveness through the expansion of broadband and 5G networks. Together, these pillars support 3SI's publicly envisioned mission to bridge development gaps, strengthen regional cooperation, and align Central and Eastern Europe with broader EU and NATO priorities (Orzelska-Stączek, Ukielski, 2020).

Although the 3SI is primarily conceived as a regional development project, it is also seen as a strategic response to external influences such as China's Belt and Road Initiative. Some analysis suggests that the overlap between the infrastructural goals of the Belt and Road Initiative, and the 3SI highlights a subtle geopolitical rivalry, with the 3SI serving as a counterbalance to China's growing presence in Europe (Petrosyan, 2022). By promoting Western-backed infrastructure projects, the 3SI strengthens transatlantic priorities and reduces dependence on Chinese-funded initiatives, which is in line with EU and U.S. strategic objectives.

On the surface, the initiative presents itself as a geoeconomic framework aimed at addressing infrastructural disparities in Central and Eastern Europe (Congressional Research Service, 2021). It promotes the development of the three main pillars

Figure 1: The member states of the Three Seas Initiative.



presented above and, from this perspective, the 3SI appears as a key driver of economic growth, regional development, and integration, bridging the historical divides between Western and Eastern Europe (Bojinović Fenko, 2022; Zbińkowski, 2019). The stated aim of the initiative is to address geo-economic needs and promote economic convergence within the EU.

However, this study raises the question of whether the initiative is truly an economic cooperation aimed at regional development, or whether its motivations are predominantly geopolitical and military in nature. This duality has already been identified in previous studies, particularly with regard to its impact on the strategies of the European Union and NATO. This article attempts to answer a key research question: can the 3SI be seen as primarily an economically motivated initiative, or is it a strategic and militarily motivated platform where the economy is of secondary importance? This question is important as it defines the geopolitical relevance of the initiative and weighs the consequences of participating in the project.

While the economic benefits of the initiative are obvious, its military and geopolitical dimensions should be scrutinized more closely. Scholars such as Thomann (2019) have suggested that the 3SI is more than a regional development project. They see it as a strategic instrument for the Central and Eastern European states to assert their influence within the EU, create a counterbalance to Western European dominance, and reduce dependence on Russian energy. Similarly, Gorka (2018) highlights the complicating role of U.S. support, which strains relations between the 3SI members and key Western European powers, particularly Germany. Furthermore, contributions from the Atlantic Council underscore the importance of the initiative not only for EU integration but also for NATO's logistical and operational needs, underlining its dual utility as an economic and military framework (Arha et al., 2024).

Through a comparative analysis of the infrastructural and geopolitical dimensions of the initiative, this article examines the extent to which 3SI's true nature aligns with geoeconomic or geostrategic imperatives. By analyzing the interplay between the economic and military objectives, the research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the Initiative's role in reshaping the political and economic landscape of Central and Eastern Europe.

2 METHODOLOGY

This research uses a multi-method qualitative approach that integrates document analysis, historical contextualization and comparative geopolitical analysis to investigate 3SI. The methodology aims to assess the geopolitical, military, and economic dimensions of the initiative and place it within the broader framework of international relations and strategy.

The primary methodological component involves a systematic analysis of primary and secondary documents, using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to identify recurring themes and discourses. Primary sources include speeches and official statements. In addition, policy papers and strategic reports from organizations such as the Atlantic Council and the Kosciuszko Institute will be analyzed to provide a basis for thematic exploration.

Thematic coding is used to identify recurring patterns in the data, focusing on themes such as “economic integration”, “military logistics” and “energy security”. The codes are derived inductively through a systematic review. This method mirrors the approach of Albrycht et al. (2020), where digital infrastructure was categorized thematically and linked to broader geopolitical strategies.

The discourse analysis complements the thematic coding by examining how the goals of 3SI are framed by different actors. This includes analyzing rhetorical strategies, implicit assumptions, and narrative contrasts between actors. For example, the U.S. often emphasizes countering Russian influence, while Central and Eastern European actors highlight economic development. The analysis examines how these narratives

shape the power dynamics within the initiative, drawing on frameworks such as Arha et al. (2024), which examine NATO's influence on regional infrastructure projects.

Although primary documents are crucial to the analysis, the study also includes a detailed review of secondary sources, including academic literature, policy analysis and expert commentary. Works such as Thomann (2019) and Górká (2018) provide important insights into the dual use of 3SI infrastructure, which combines economic and strategic objectives.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the results, findings from primary and secondary sources such as speeches, policy papers and academic literature are compared as part of the data triangulation process. To avoid contradictory interpretations, priority is given to peer-reviewed publications and the results are compared with official reports. This method ensures that the trends and conclusions are consistent.

To enhance the broader understanding of the topic under discussion, the 3SI is placed in a broader geopolitical framework through historical contextualization, linking its origins to the interwar *Intermarium* concept. This contextualization goes beyond historical references to examine how modern changes – such as NATO's eastward expansion and U.S. strategic repositioning – influence 3SI objectives. For example, parallels are drawn between NATO's logistical priorities and historical infrastructure strategies aimed at regional alignment against external threats.

Finally, cost-benefit evaluations are made to better evaluate the feasibility and impact of 3SI projects. While geopolitical narratives dominate, the economic value of initiatives such as Rail Baltica and Via Carpathia is assessed. This component ensures that economic arguments are considered as well as their strategic implications.

By combining thematic coding, discourse analysis, historical contextualization, and economic evaluation, this methodology provides a comprehensive framework to explore the dual purpose of the 3SI and provide nuanced insights into their geopolitical and geo-economic significance.

3 DISCUSSION

The initiative was officially launched in 2015 by the Croatian-Polish tandem and received significant support from U.S. institutions. Officially, the idea of the 3SI was born at a meeting of representatives of most of the current members on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York, to which the then Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, but also the American think tank The Atlantic Council had invited (Dudzińska et al., 2021).

The Croatian momentum continued in 2016, as the first summit of the 3SI took place in the coastal city of Dubrovnik. This was followed by a summit in Warsaw in 2017 and in 2018 it was Bucharest's turn to mark the pillar countries of the platform and at the same time symbolically commemorate the three seas: the Adriatic, the Baltic and the Black Sea (Rozycki, 2023).

3.1 The Intermarium

Since its foundation in 2015, the 3SI has focused primarily on the infrastructural challenges of its member states (Kowal, Orzelska, 2019). However, it also revisits the Intermarium concept proposed by the then Polish leader Józef Piłsudski in the interwar period. Piłsudski envisioned a federation of Central and Eastern European countries that would serve as protection against the great powers of the Soviet Union and Germany (Okulewicz, 2001). His plan aimed to create an alliance between states such as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and others, which relied on both military and economic cooperation (Ištók et al., 2018).

The Intermarium faced major challenges, mainly due to the different political goals of the countries involved and the fear of Polish dominance, which was reminiscent of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. These factors, coupled with the rise of totalitarian regimes and the growing influence of Germany, led to the decline of the concept. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union blocked any regional cooperation that excluded it, undermining any possibility of cooperation within or with the West (Kundera, 1983). Therefore, any attempt to revive the project, such as the push for regional cooperation proposed by Leszek Moczulski to counter Soviet influence, had no chance of developing (Izdebski, 1999).

Although the Intermarium did not succeed in practice, its idea served as an “imagined geography” that supported the notion of Central and Eastern Europe as a distinct geopolitical entity with shared historical experiences and strategic interests (Laruelle, Rivera, 2019).

In the 1990s, however, initiatives such as the Višegrad Group created favorable conditions for regional cooperation. They initially played a crucial role in strengthening collective security efforts and eventually paved the way for the establishment of the 3SI (Pawlikowska, 2006).

3.2 The European Isthmus

Central and Eastern Europe is an economically developing macroregion with several small, mostly Slavic countries that share a common Austro-Hungarian history. In this context, the 3SI is presented as a platform for economic cooperation and regional development.

However, this view ignores the geopolitical situation: as in the interwar period, these countries are still caught between two giants: Germany and Russia. And not only that: as during the Cold War, when the Iron Curtain ran along the western border of the region, today a new geopolitical border has emerged in the east, once again separating the “West” and the “East” of Europe (Petroni, 2022). Why again here, exactly along this region?

The answer lies in geography and its geostrategic implications: The region of interest for the 3SI is not only the area connecting three seas, but it also does so along

the shortest possible axes: from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic Sea via Poland, Czechia, Austria and Slovenia and from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea via Poland and the two partner countries Moldova and Ukraine, from Gdansk to Odessa or alternatively via Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania to Constanta (Figure 2).

This represents a continent-wide European isthmus that ideally separates the European and Russian worlds (Petroni, Mussetti, 2021). The idea is partly reminiscent of Fernand Braudel's concept of the Polish Isthmus, which connects the Baltic Sea with the Danube and, along the river, with the Black Sea (Braudel, 1949). Today, this dividing line is also NATO's eastern border and the area where most European–Russian tensions are developing, mainly due to the war in Ukraine, but also tensions in Transnistria, as well as the post-election protests in Belarus in 2020.

The geopolitical implications are obvious: both NATO and the United States are investing heavily right along the isthmus. The U.S. maintains an official military presence in Estonia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria (and Greece), while NATO is currently investing in a major expansion of the Mihail Kogălniceanu military base at the airport of the same name on the outskirts of Constanta, which is set to become the largest NATO military base on the entire European continent with 10,000 soldiers and civilians by 2030 (Necsutu, 2024).

3.3 The United States and “New Europe”

The active U.S. military role in the region is coupled with very active support for the 3SI: it has already been mentioned that the impetus for the whole platform came from an invitation by the Washington-based think tank The Atlantic Council, which is now one of the four strategic partners.

At the concrete level, the United States also acts as the main external contributor to the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund: at the beginning, it pledged one billion U.S. dollars, the highest contribution among the strategic partners (Pompeo, 2020). This pledge was later called into question as the Biden administration had a more cautious approach (Zeöld, 2019). This led to a debate about the costs and benefits of active participation, where scholars actively arguing for the strategic benefits of the U.S. presence in the project (Kochis, 2021). Ultimately, the original goal was watered down and the U.S. is currently investing \$300 million in the form of a debt instrument, as formalized at the initiative's Bucharest Summit in 2023 (3SI Research Center, 2024).

Nonetheless, the active involvement of the U.S. in the 3SI can be seen as a consequence of the development of a special relationship with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which are seen as more aligned with U.S. foreign policy, particularly in relation to military interventions such as the Iraq war, than Western European powers (Kagan, 2003). In the early 2000s, the U.S. began to talk explicitly about the new geopolitical doctrine towards the region, seeing the countries that had just joined NATO as the new and strongest supporters of U.S. policy in Europe

and towards Russia. The idea was first articulated by then U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who in January 2003 referred to France and Germany as “Old Europe” and emphasized that the center of gravity was shifting eastward, which he called “New Europe” (Baker, 2003). Later that month, ten countries of The Vilnius Group (a coalition of aspiring NATO members) signed the Vilnius Letter supporting the U.S. decision to invade Iraq, marking a major shift in European attitudes on the issue (Statement of the Vilnius Group Countries, 2003). It was clear that the United States was actively working to create a new center of support for its policies in the countries of the former communist bloc to replace more traditional alliances: Rumsfeld’s “New Europe” doctrine created a new set of allies for the U.S. in the heart of Europe, ready to shift the center of gravity of geopolitical decision-making in Europe (Michta, 1999).

3.4 The role of the other Strategic partners

Before examining this hypothesis, it’s important to consider the role of the three other strategic partners in the 3SI: Germany, the European Commission, and Japan (which joined in 2024).

The role of the European Commission is straightforward: it coordinates the initiative’s policy within the EU framework and coordinates the infrastructure projects with the official EU channels. Its involvement is mainly technical, as it doesn’t provide additional funding beyond existing EU resources.

Germany and Japan play a less active and financially less significant role than the U.S. Germany’s natural position as a strategic partner stems from its economic integration with most member states. While Germany seeks to monitor and influence the geo-economic priorities of the region, its presence shouldn’t be confused with a leadership role, given its lack of assertive Ostpolitik. However, Germany could renew its special relationship with Russia once the Ukraine conflict ends or stabilizes. In this case, Russia could see this as an opportunity to influence regional dynamics and seek to influence economic and energy relations in Central and Eastern Europe through Germany, especially given the continued gas dependence of part of the region on Russia, notwithstanding the strategic goal of the initiative to promote its independence in this area (Khorolskaya, 2022).

Given its different geographical location, Japan’s position differs from that of Germany but is similar on the aspect of alignment with U.S. priorities and geopolitical preferences.

It can be assumed that Japan has joined the initiative as a strategic partner to capitalize on economic opportunities and potentially benefit from infrastructure investments, particularly in areas such as energy infrastructure and digital technology. Japan’s expertise in nuclear energy and transportation logistics could play a role in driving the 3SI projects forward, especially as the region looks to modernize its

infrastructure amid geopolitical tensions (Yoshida, 2023). On the other hand, Japan, much like Germany, remains well aligned with U.S. geopolitical grand strategy, so it's possible to see how its role can support U.S. priorities in this region.

3.5 The Absentees: France and Italy

To understand the position of the 3SI and its geopolitical potential, it is perhaps equally important to highlight the major absentees: France and Italy. France's lack of presence can be interpreted as a natural evolution of its international priorities: Historically, France was not very active in Central and Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War, considering the region as part of the German economic sphere (Froment-Meurice, 2000). France's priorities were clearly focused on the Mediterranean and the former African colonies, and its role as a strategic partner in the 3SI probably represented too great an opportunity cost. France may also have avoided participation because of the 3SI's geopolitical stance towards Russia, preferring a flexible Ostpolitik.

Italy's absence follows a similar logic. Despite Italy's direct economic interests in the 3SI, in particular because of its historical focus on Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. as host of the Central European Initiative in Trieste), the country has decided not to participate. Italy could benefit from improved access to Eastern and Northern European markets and the visibility of its infrastructure projects, but it seems that Italy is avoiding the geopolitical constraints that the 3SI entails and prioritizing independence in its strategies. Italy has traditionally tried to keep a balanced position towards the East notably Russia, playing the role of Russia's "best friend" within the European Union (Germani, Iacoboni, 2017). Considering that the 3SI is dominated by countries historically opposed to Russia, and that these countries faithfully support the U.S. priorities in its foreign policy, it is plausible to interpret that Italy considers its cooperation within the platform as too limiting for its foreign policy goals.

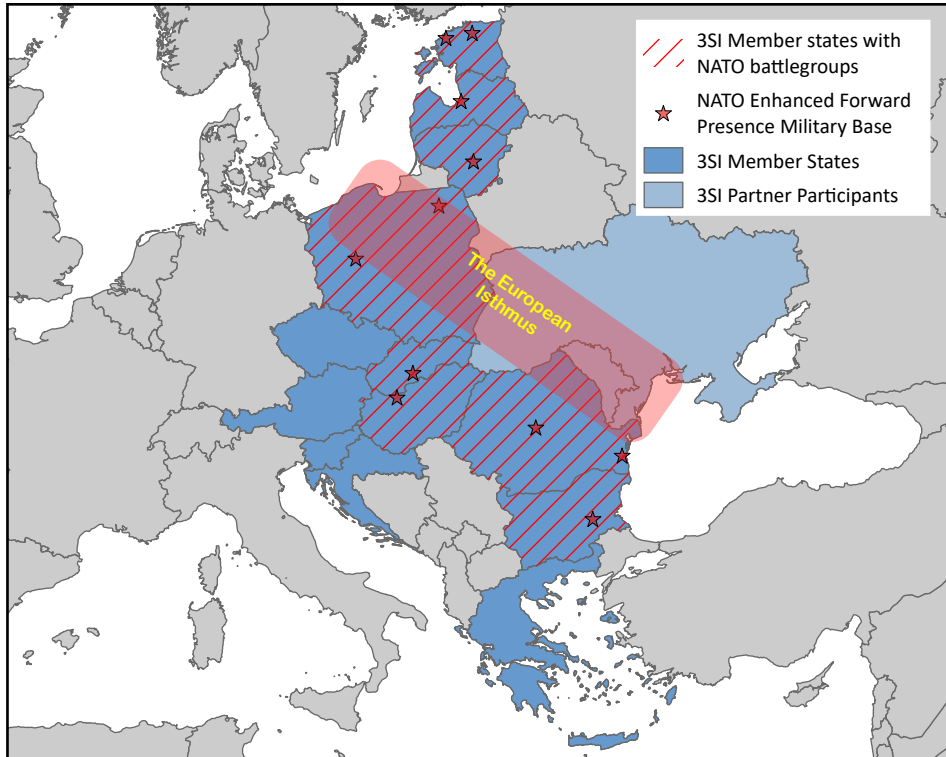
3.6 The geopolitical shadow of 3SI

"Welcome to the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) – a politically inspired, commercially driven platform for improving connectivity between thirteen EU Member States allocated between Baltic, Adriatic and Black seas." This is the headline with which the 3SI is presented on the website of the Vilnius 2024 Summit (Three Seas Summit, 2024). Although the 3SI is presented as a platform to improve connectivity, it hints at a political dimension. The reference to "transatlantic connections" suggests that the U.S. is not only involved as a sponsor, although it has no direct connection to the infrastructure. This detail underscores the broader geopolitical role of the 3SI. The U.S. relies on the countries in the macroregion to advance its European goals, while major Western European states such as France and Italy remain outside the project. This underscores

the idea that the 3SI serves as an instrument for U.S. “New Europe” policy and promotes U.S. interests, especially after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the growing rift between the West and Russia. The 3SI is closely aligned with U.S. foreign policy interests in relation to its two key global adversaries: China and Russia. In relation to China and the Belt and Road Initiative, the 3SI reflects elements of the geopolitical rivalry between China and the U.S. and influences the strategic priorities of its member states. U.S. support for the 3SI can be understood as part of a broader effort to curtail Chinese influence in Europe (Petrosyan, 2022). At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, the 3SI serves as a key mechanism to counter Russian influence and strengthen NATO’s eastern flank – a crucial element in advancing U.S. foreign policy objectives (Gottfried, 2021). A look at the map (Figure 2) of newly developed NATO and U.S. military presences in Europe shows that they are almost exclusively concentrated in Central and Eastern Europe, in the area of interest for the 3SI.

In 2017, NATO deployed four multinational battalions in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland (500 to 1000 soldiers per country). These have been increased to the

Figure 2: NATO military presence in Central and Eastern Europe.



size of brigades (from 1000 to 4000 soldiers) after the NATO summit in Madrid in 2022. By July 2024, NATO had a total of eight multinational battlegroups, all of which are deployed in countries that are part of the 3SI: Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia (NATO, 2024a). These battlegroups vary in size, with the most prominent being those in Poland (over 11 thousand soldiers), Latvia (4000), Romania (4700), Lithuania (3700) and Estonia (2200) (NATO, 2024b).

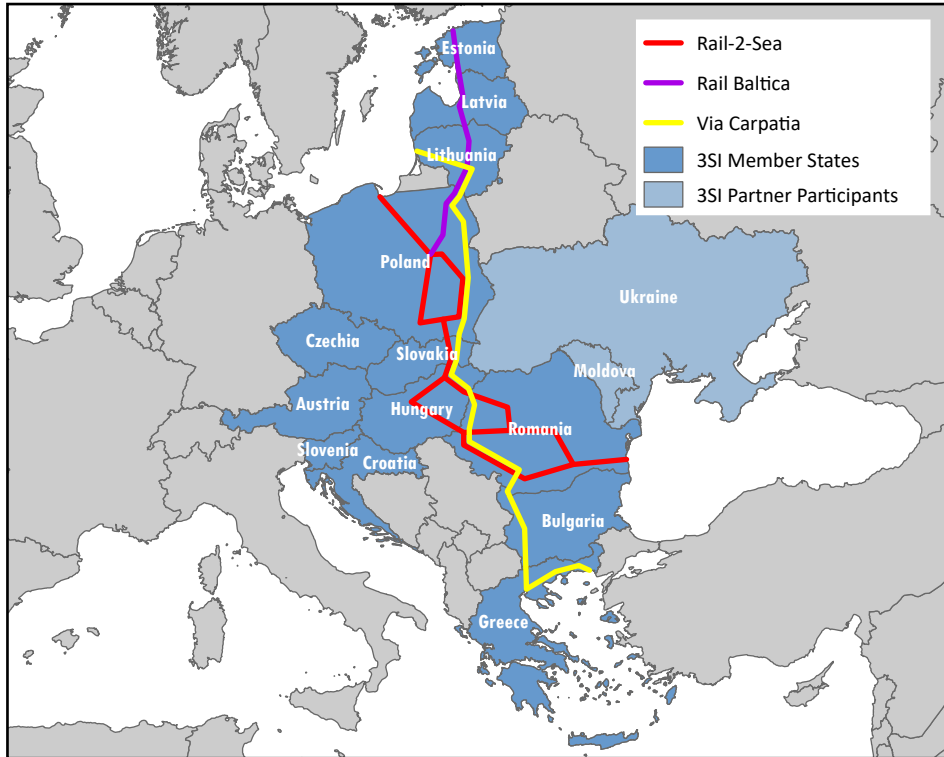
In addition to the NATO presence, even more U.S. troops are directly deployed (US Department of Defense, 2022). Most of them are stationed in Bulgaria, Romania and Poland (the latter two are also the largest countries in the 3SI). Most of them have been newly deployed by the U.S., while at least a thousand have been redeployed from Germany (to Romania). Already at the NATO summit in Madrid in 2022, the U.S. declared its intention to increase its presence in Poland, Romania and the Baltic states – a policy it has maintained in recent years (NATO, 2022). This presence could even increase if tensions in the region remain high, as stated in spring by the head of the U.S. European Command, Christopher Cavoli (Shane, 2024).

This is confirmed by the fact that NATO is currently making one of its largest military investments in Europe: the aforementioned expansion of the Mihail Kogălniceanu military base and airport near Constanta, Romania.

The military build-up of NATO and the U.S. is concentrated in two main areas: the Baltic countries (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) and the Black Sea (especially Romania), with minimal increases in between. A key issue is the lack of fast transportation between these two regions, as road and rail connections are poor. The railroads in the Baltic states still use the Russian track gauge of 1520 mm, which is wider than the European standard of 1435 mm. The 3SI aims to change this with projects (Figure 3) such as Rail Baltica, which connects Tallinn and Warsaw, Via Carpatia, which connects Lithuania and Poland with Greece, and Rail 2 Sea, which connects Gdansk with Constanta. Rail Baltica will use the European standard gauge, thus ensuring the integration of the Baltic States into European rail system (Ploom, Veebel, 2022). These projects, originally stemming from previous EU programs, have gained new momentum and stronger support through the 3SI initiatives and procedures.

The military value of these projects is obvious, as rapid troop movements between the Baltic and Black Sea regions are strategically more important than their economic value. The volume of traffic between these areas doesn't justify such infrastructure, as the ports mainly serve global routes, which makes new land connections questionable. Traffic between Gdansk and Constanta doesn't necessarily overlap. Nevertheless, fast land connections are essential for military mobility, especially between these two strategic hotspots. Furthermore, the introduction of the Stephenson gauge in the Baltic states would phase out the Russian gauge, making a possible Russian invasion more difficult, as narrowing a rail gauge is much easier than widening it, as seen in both world wars (Lotysz, 2024).

Figure 3: Main 3SI road and railway projects: Via Carpatia (road), Rail2Sea (rail) and Rail Baltica (rail).



The digital framework that is being set up as part of the initiative also has a military dimension. Jamming and hacking digital connections, the main element of cyberwar, would be an important element in a hypothetical confrontation between NATO and Russia, so building digital connections also means building communication networks that are more resistant to foreign cyberattacks.

The importance of cybersecurity, digital infrastructure and cooperation between 3SI states can safeguard critical systems from cyber threats. A stronger digital framework in modern warfare improves cybersecurity, guarantees a more resilient communication network, and ultimately aligns with EU and U.S. digital security standards to promote regional growth and protect critical infrastructure from cyber threats (Albrycht et al., 2020). The effective and rapid collection, processing and distribution of intelligence is critical to maintaining an operational advantage over the adversary.

Modern warfare relies on information networks, which in turn rely on digital systems that are resilient to both cyber and traditional hardware attacks. As weapon

systems increasingly rely on autonomous decision making through artificial intelligence, the digital framework to support these technologies is essential.

In NATO operations, communication is crucial for interoperability, so that the military systems of different nations can work together efficiently and ensure a coordinated effort. In addition, strong communication networks are an asset in psychological warfare, propaganda and countering misinformation. With the rise of generative AI and rapid information sharing via direct messaging platforms, control over resilient hardware may be the key to information dominance or information blindness.

4 CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that the 3SI, although publicly presented as an economic and infrastructural platform, primarily serves military and geopolitical objectives. The qualitative content analysis and documentary review reveal that infrastructure projects such as the Via Carpatia and Rail Baltica could very well be used to improve NATO's military mobility across Central and Eastern Europe and enable rapid deployment of troops between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. This dual-use infrastructure, confirmed by primary sources and expert analysis, underscores the dominance of military priorities over economic development.

The United States plays a central role in shaping 3SI's strategic direction, deploying financial and military resources to align the initiative with its broader "New Europe" doctrine. This doctrine aims to create a U.S.-aligned geopolitical bloc in Europe to counterbalance the influence of Western European powers and Russia. The results underscore the U.S. role in strengthening NATO's eastern flank through 3SI and enhancing regional defense capabilities.

The European isthmus, which connects the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas, is proving to be an important geostrategic corridor, further emphasizing the military importance of 3SI. Infrastructure projects in this region enable rapid military movements and strengthen NATO's operational readiness in the event of a conflict with Russia. The strategic importance of controlling this corridor underlines the primary military function of 3SI's infrastructure investments.

Despite the claims of economic cooperation, these projects have only limited economic justification according to the study. The low volume of north-south trade compared to east-west traffic further calls into question the economic rationale for such large-scale investments and suggests that their primary benefit lies in military logistics.

The study acknowledges a geopolitical realignment within the EU, with Central and Eastern European states aligning themselves more closely with U.S. and NATO priorities, while Western powers such as France and Italy remain at a distance. This divide, supported by comparative geopolitical analysis, reflects the apparent military focus of the initiative, which could conflict with the foreign policy goals of Western European countries.

The understanding of the dual use of infrastructure is not new and is not the focus of this analysis. More important is the hierarchy of importance between the civilian and military dimensions, as it inevitably influences the long-term planning and implementation of these projects. The military value of these initiatives influences the geopolitical landscape, where shifts in the military balance can trigger balancing efforts that may drive further military developments.

This raises a fundamental question: Do the infrastructure projects of the 3SI genuinely prioritize economic relevance? Although many projects undoubtedly bring economic benefits, given limited resources it is essential to prioritize those that bring the greatest benefits — both human and economic. Projects such as a road between Gdansk and Constanta or a railroad that shortens travel times between Tallinn and Prague may offer tangible benefits. However, the value of these investments remains questionable, especially given the relatively low volume of economic exchange along the north-west–south-east axis compared to the dominant east–west traffic (Kaup, 2008). While a connecting infrastructure may lead to an increase in cargo traffic, its economic importance diminishes when considering that both the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea already independently serve global shipping routes.

However, the military implications of this infrastructure are clear. The ability to swiftly move troops and equipment between the Baltic and Black Seas is critical in the event of a NATO-Russia conflict, underscoring the strategic importance of the European isthmus. NATO's ongoing military build-up along this corridor underpins the conclusion that the 3SI serves primarily military purposes and that economic aspects are secondary. This aligns with U.S. strategic priorities, as the initiative supports Washington's "New Europe" doctrine, which aims to create a U.S.-friendly macroregion within the EU. Consequently, participating countries must acknowledge that the 3SI is not merely an economic platform, but a geopolitical project aimed at strengthening the West's military capabilities and enhancing transatlantic relations, often more closely aligned with U.S. interests than with broader European objectives.

The geopolitical weight of the initiative must be carefully considered by the participating countries, as they risk becoming instruments in the broader strategic competition between the United States and Russia. The European isthmus, stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, has become a new dividing line between the West and Russia. For countries wishing to develop closer relations with Russia in the future, the commitments made under the 3SI could limit their flexibility and options and bind them to a Western-oriented security framework that could hinder diplomatic or economic realignments.

This geopolitical reality also has implications for countries that may consider participating in the initiative in the future. While the economic benefits of the 3SI appear attractive, potential members must evaluate the long-term constraints and alignments involved. The dual-use nature of the projects, which are strongly geared towards military objectives, could make it more difficult for these states to be flexible in their foreign policy.

Furthermore, the initiative can be analyzed through the lens of Mackinder's Heartland Theory. By strengthening the European isthmus as a line of containment against Russia, the 3SI effectively disrupts potential cooperation between the Heartland, as conceptualized by Mackinder in 1904, and the Western Rimland (Mackinder, 1904). This containment strategy prevents closer relations between Russia and Europe and thus the hypothetical long-term formation of a new kind of global geopolitical superpower. By reinforcing this divide, the 3SI contributes to the consolidation of a geostrategic architecture that prioritizes Western dominance over Eurasian integration. While this may serve immediate Western interests, it raises profound questions about the long-term geopolitical dynamics in Europe and the broader world order.

Acknowledgement

A special thanks to Miha Koderman, PhD, for his advisory role in improving this paper.

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POBUDA TREH MORIJ: REGIONALNO SODELOVANJE ALI VOJAŠKI PROJEKT ZA NOVO EVROPO?

Povzetek

Članek obravnava geostrateški pomen Pobude treh morij (3SI), ki vključuje 13 držav članic Evropske unije iz Srednje in Vzhodne Evrope ter strateško podporo štirih zunanjih partnerjev: ZDA, Evropske komisije, Nemčije in Japonske. Pobuda, ki se na prvi pogled zdi kot platforma za izboljšanje regionalne infrastrukture in povezljivosti, vključuje pomembne geopolitične in vojaške vidike.

Pobuda treh morij je bila uradno ustanovljena leta 2015 z namenom izboljšanja infrastrukturnih povezav med državami, ki ležijo med Baltskim, Črnim in Jadranskim morjem. Cilj Pobude treh morij je trojen: izboljšanje cestnih in železniških povezav, povečanje energetske varnosti z diverzifikacijo virov ter izgradnja napredne digitalne infrastrukture. Gre torej za pomembne stebre, na katerih naj bi se razvijala ekonomska rast in regionalno povezovanje.

Ne glede na to že prvi pogledi na zgodovinsko ozadje in podporo pobudi kažejo na globlji geopolitični pomen. Pobuda se zgleduje po zgodovinskem konceptu Intermarium, ki ga je med obema svetovnjima vojnama predlagal poljski voditelj Józef Piłsudski. Ta koncept je bil zasnovan kot obrambni zavezniški blok srednjeevropskih držav, namenjen obrambi pred Nemčijo in Sovjetsko zvezo. Danes se Intermarium oživlja v obliki Pobude treh morij, kjer pobuda služi kot sredstvo za krepitev vojaških in varnostnih zmožnosti držav, ki jih obkrožata Rusija in Zahod.

Medtem ko se Pobuda treh morij uradno predstavlja kot ekonomska in infrastrukturna pobuda, članek poudarja, da imajo številni projekti v resnici močan vojaški pomen. Pobuda je ključnega pomena za okrepitev infrastrukturnih zmogljivosti vzdolž Evropske ožine, med Baltskim, Črnim in Jadranskim morjem. Evropska ožina predstavlja geostrateški koridor, ki povezuje sever in jug Evrope ter omogoča hiter prehod vojaških sil med Baltskim in Črnim morjem, kar je ključno v primeru morebitnega konflikta med Natom in Rusijo.

Infrastrukturni projekti, kot sta na primer Via Carpatia in Rail Baltica, so strateško zasnovani za izboljšanje vojaške mobilnosti Nata v regiji. Te povezave omogočajo hitro premikanje vojaških enot med Baltskim in Črnim morjem, kar je ključnega pomena v primeru morebitnega vojaškega konflikta z Rusijo. Via Carpatia bo povezovala Litvo in Poljsko z romunsko obalo Črnega morja, medtem ko bo Rail Baltica povezala Estonijo z Varšavo in naprej do zahodnih držav. Obe železniški povezavi bosta uporabljali standardni evropski tir, kar bo dolgoročno omogočilo opustitev ruskega tira v baltskih državah, s čimer se bo otežila morebitna ruska vojaška invazija. Vojaška mobilnost je ključna prednost teh projektov, kar potrjuje tudi širitev Natove prisotnosti v regiji, zlasti v državah, kot sta Poljska in Romunija.

Članek nadalje raziskuje, kako ZDA aktivno podpirajo 3SI, ne le finančno, ampak tudi geopolitično. Pobuda je del širše strategije «nove Evrope», ki jo ZDA izvajajo z namenom vzpostavitve proameriške makroregije znotraj Evrope. To pomeni zmanjšanje vpliva zahodnoevropskih držav, kot sta Francija in Nemčija, ter krepitev zavezništev v Srednji in Vzhodni Evropi.

ZDA so eden največjih finančnih podpornikov Pobude treh morij in so obljubile milijardne prispevke k razvoju infrastrukturnih projektov, ki izboljšujejo vojaško pripravljenost. Ta finančna pomoč je del dolgoročnih prizadevanj za krepitev vzhodne strani Nata, kjer je po ruski invaziji na Ukrajino prišlo do intenzivnega procesa krepitev vojaških zmogljivosti. ZDA s tem krepijo svoje vojaške sile v Evropi in gradijo novo linijo zavezništev, ki so bolj usklajena z ameriškimi interesi.

Članek tudi omenja, zakaj pomembne zahodnoevropske države, kot sta Francija in Italija, ne sodelujejo v Pobudi teh morij. Francija se tradicionalno osredotoča na svoje interese v Sredozemlju in afriških kolonijah, zato se zdi, da bi bilo sodelovanje v pobudi zanjo predrago glede na njene druge prioritete. Poleg tega se Francija izogiba neposredni udeležbi v projektih, ki bi lahko zaostri njene odnose z Rusijo, saj želi imeti proste roke pri oblikovanju lastne vzhodne politike.

Italija ima nasprotno neposredne gospodarske interese v Srednji in Vzhodni Evropi, zlasti v državah Pobude treh morij, kjer bi izboljšana infrastruktura lahko koristila njenim trgovinskim interesom. Kljub temu Italija doslej ni pokazala pripravljenosti za sodelovanje, verjetno zaradi geopolitičnih omejitev, ki jih prinaša pobuda. Italija tradicionalno ohranja uravnoteženo politiko do Rusije in se morda boji, da bi sodelovanje v Pobudi treh morij ogrozilo to ravnovesje.

Poleg infrastrukturnih projektov, povezanih s cestami in železnicami, ima Pobuda treh morij tudi močno digitalno in energetske komponento. Pobuda namreč vključuje projekte, ki so namenjeni krepitvi kibernetne varnosti in odpornosti proti kibernetnim napadom. Članek izpostavlja, da je krepitev digitalnih povezav pomembna ne le za gospodarstvo, temveč tudi za vojaško varnost, saj hitra in varna komunikacija v sodobnih vojaških operacijah predstavlja ključno prednost. Poleg tega so energetske projekti, namenjeni raznolikosti virov energije in zmanjšanju odvisnosti od Rusije, ključni za strateške cilje pobude. ZDA in druge zaveznice spodbujajo naložbe v energetske infrastrukturo, da bi zmanjšale vpliv Rusije na energetske trg Srednje in Vzhodne Evrope. To vključuje projekte za izgradnjo novih plinovodov in električnih omrežij, ki bodo izboljšali energetske varnost držav članic pobude.

Članek sklene, da je Pobuda treh morij, čeprav se predstavlja kot ekonomska platforma, v veliki meri vojaški in geopolitični projekt. Infrastruktura vzdolž Evropske ožine, ki jo gradijo, služi predvsem krepitvi povezave med ključnimi vojaškimi točkami v srednji in vzhodni Evropi, kar omogoča hitro mobilnost Natovih enot. Gospodarski učinki teh projektov so sekundarni in omejeni v primerjavi z njihovim vojaškim pomenom.