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Intermarium: a geopolitical narrative of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI)

SUMMARY In 2015, Poland launched its own large-scale geo-economic project, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), and since then 12 other EU Member States have joined. The holistic cooperation has identified a large number of economic and infrastructure development needs, with the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Seas as its geographical borders (Central and Eastern European region). After Russia's military invasion against Ukraine in 2022, the global geopolitical importance of this region and initiative has been enhanced. This paper examines that how the historical Intermarium concepts are reflected in the objectives of the 3SI and what are the main similarities and differences between the two geopolitical projects.

KEYWORDS Three Seas Initiative, Intermarium, Poland, Central and Eastern Europe, geopolitics, geoconomics

Introduction

After Russia's military and hybrid warfare interventions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014, the European Union, and especially its member states located on its eastern borders and on the eastern flank of NATO, increasingly feared another possible Russian intervention. This happened in 2022, during the Russian invasion launched against Ukraine. The war also plunged Poland into a volatile security environment. Nowadays, the official military, defence and national security strategies related to the dominant states and organizations of the Euro-Atlantic power space (USA; Great Britain; France, Germany, NATO; EU) clearly

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describe the global security environment as deteriorating, unpredictable and turbulent. By definition, Moscow's empire-building ambitions play a significant role in this, which are actively present due to their geographical proximity and represent a major security threat to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

In 2015, Poland launched its own large-scale geoeconomic project, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). 13 countries joined since its foundation. Although the military aspect is missing from its holistic approach, it has also formulated a significant number of economic, infrastructure and digitalization development needs and project ideas. The direction of its geographical development is north-south, and its borders are marked by the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Seas. Within this region, with the exception of a few states, there are countries with relatively small populations and areas.

Nowadays, Poland could theoretically be the leading country in its wider region based on its area and demography, as well as its economic performance. Poland's geopolitical weight and its advocacy capacity have also increased significantly in recent years. For almost 10 years, the Three Seas Initiative has been steadily emerging as the region's most significant internally inspired response to geopolitical threats to the region. Since 2022, the stability of the entire CEE region became more important and crucial in geopolitical terms, which trend may continue in the future depending on the escalation of the war.

This publication examines that what kind of geopolitical narrative the historical Polish Intermarium concepts contribute to the Three Seas Initiative, and what are the main differences between the strategic objectives and tools of the Intermarium and the 3SI.

General geopolitical positions of Poland

The territory of Poland is 312,685 km², almost half of which (48.2%) is suitable for agricultural activities. The country has a 440 km long coastline, and the length of its land borders is 2685 km. It borders a total of seven countries: Czechia (699 km), Slovakia (517 km), Ukraine (498 km), Germany (467 km), Belarus (375 km), Russia (209 km [Kaliningrad Oblast]), Lithuania (100 km). Its climate is temperate continental, and in some regions oceanic and continental. It has a natural barrier only in the southern part of the country (Carpathian Mountains), the majority of the country's territory lies on the North European Plain, and is therefore a buffer zone from a historical point of view. The estimated population of the country in 2024 is 38 746 310 people, the rate of population

decline is 1% per year. Based on the results of the 2011 census, it can be considered an ethnically homogeneous country (97% of Poles). Based on an estimated distribution for 2022, the proportion of Catholics is 90%. (CIA World Factbook, 2024). The country produces 4.4% of the GDP of the European Union. Its GDP per capita is 30 100 euros, which is below the EU average (37 600 euros per capita). It has strong economic ties with the EU: 65% of its imports and 75% of its exports is part of its trade (Eurostat, 2024).

Within the Three Seas Initiative, Poland has a unique power potential: it represents 31% of the total 3SI population and almost a quarter of its territory (23%), while its economic weight (27% of total GDP) is also exceptional (Eurostat, 2023). Poland represents regional power abilities in this area that covers most of the whole Central and Eastern Europe. This potentially leading part of Poland belongs to a region, to Central and Eastern Europe whose countries has many common political, historical, cultural, social, and economic characteristics and processes (Salamin, 2015), that trigger distinctive European spatial policy making initiations targeting CEE (Sütő et al., 2010; Damsgaard et al., 2011). It has become even more interesting to act as a potential power centre in this region, as this region is understood as a single characteristic space even from the point of view of the most recent geo economical and geopolitical processes, from China's global ambitions (Kocsis et al., 2017; Péti, 2017).

The country belongs to Euro-Atlantic integration and is part of the European security architecture. It joined the EU in 2004 and NATO in 1999. The total number of its armed forces is 210 000, and the estimated ratio of military expenditure to GDP in 2024 is 4.1% (Eurostat, 2024). It is located on the eastern external border of the EU and on the eastern flank of NATO, its geographical location is connected with a key defense function, with heavy focus on territorial and border defense.

Natural geography influences military, political, economic and geostrategic planning. Geography does not change, topography and climatic features continue to influence the geopolitical objectives and behavior of individual countries (Kaplan, 2013). The heartland of the Polish state originally lies in the area bounded by the Vistula and Oder Rivers and the Pripet Marshes, and since the initial expansions has been predominantly limited to lowland areas. That is why, in the course of history, wars were waged against the Poles from the west and the east multiple times (Kostanick, 1959).

The Three Seas Initiative as a geopolitical cooperation

In its first Joint Declaration (2016), the Three Seas Initiative declared that it wants to implement a large-scale north-south cooperation based primarily on holistic economic development projects between the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Seas. The document explained that since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, despite of the Euro-Atlantic integration, the north-south economic and infrastructural relations and energy corridors have not been developed in the mentioned region, which puts the entire region at a disadvantageous position compared to the Western European regions (Joint Statement, 2016). Today, 13 EU countries are members of the initiative (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia), while Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia are present as partner participants. With the accession of Greece in 2023 and the inclusion of the Aegean Sea, the cooperation practically extends to four seas (Joint Statement, 2023).

With the exception of Poland and Romania, the organization, which has a stable number of members, brings together “small states”, which group of states is basically interested in strengthening its international relations. Individually, the participating states would be unable to implement an extensive, north-south infrastructure development strategy. In the case of 3SI, the main motivation of the member states is to benefit from the expected economic development of the region and to increase energy security (Orzelska-Stączek, 2024).

It was suggested earlier, especially after former US President Donald Trump’s visit to Warsaw in 2017, that the US views the project as a kind of “New Europe” that balances the influence of the EU’s Western European member states while resisting Russian expansion (Pizzolo, 2024). Formally, however, all the Joint Declarations of the 3SI, after the annual summits, regularly emphasize that their goal is only to complement the EU, to explore and implement mutual opportunities and project ideas that strengthen each other, and to coordinate with EU development policies. In addition, they firmly reject Russian military aggression in Ukraine, and it’s a fundamental rule that member states can only be EU member states (Joint Statement, 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024). Since 2018, Germany has officially participated in the summits as a partner state since 2018, while some EU institutions (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; European Investment Bank) and the World Bank Group received partner institution status that year (Joint Statement, 2018).

In the mentioned documents, they do not openly define an ideological basis, but rather place the main emphasis on the implementation of pragmatic economic development goals and projects. These mainly cover the following areas: economic development, logistics, energy infrastructure, environmental protection, R&D and digital communication. Overall, it can therefore be considered a geoeconomic project within the field of geopolitics.

It is not possible to classify the Three Seas Initiative as a completely independent initiative, since the financing of the member states accounts for only a quarter of the costs of the planned and implemented projects. The vast majority of the remaining 75% financial contribution comes either from European Union funds or from the EIB (European Investment Bank) and the EBRD (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) (3seas.eu, 2024). Its geopolitical scope and possibilities are therefore strongly limited by the fact that the cooperation does not have a sufficient amount of its own financial base.

Part of the reason for this is that the 3SI itself functions more like a loose, political and business negotiation forum with a low level of institutionalization. There are no mandatory contributions to the common budget, only voluntary donations. The results of the summits and agreements are not necessarily included in the official policy documents of the member states. Each member state participates in the initiative to a different extent. For example, Croatia is present with 32 projects, while Austria, which has a developed economy and traditionally strong ties to Germany, has 0. The Czech (2 projects), Bulgarian (4 projects) and Estonian (5 projects) numbers are also low, indicating a more cautious attitude. It typically functions as a project-oriented cooperation supported by diplomatic instruments. Poland is a dominant, attractive and at the same time the leading country of the Three Seas Initiative, however, the lack of its own financial resources narrows its scope, while many participating states do not want to risk their existing relations with Brussels and Berlin (Orzelska-Stączek, 2024).

In a broader perspective, it can be concluded that the Russian-Ukrainian war not only enhances the influence of the EU member states (and small states) located in Central and Eastern Europe and on the eastern flank of NATO, but can also pose obstacles to the whole cooperation (e.g. there is no full consensus between them on the issue of support for Ukraine regarding the details). Currently Three Seas Initiative have not been able to effectively deepen regional cooperation in the region in comparison to their capabilities. On the other hand, this statement is also valid to other regional cooperations, for example the Slavkov Triangle and the Visegrád Group (Strázay, 2024).

Effects of the Intermarium

The geopolitical narrative is considered as a tool of power and rivalry. Its purpose is to formulate a strong vision supported by arguments, which is able to mobilize the population of the relevant country, and in a more positive scenario a significant part of the international community, in order to realize the geopolitical goals of the state (Postel-Vinay, 2005). The narrative is also a tool for asserting foreign policy interests and creating strategies. The source of the narrative is typically a specific international crisis (Ó Tuathail, 2002).

The ideological and strategic foundations of the Three Seas Initiative are mainly rooted in Polish geopolitical thinking after the Third Partition of Poland (1795) and after World War I. To support it with a historical geopolitical narrative, the Polish state has the heritage of the *Intermarium* concept (POL: Międzymorze, GER: Zwischenmeer, HUN: Tengerköz) (Bartoszewicz, 2021; Pizzolo, 2024), which has been present and shaped the thinking of decision-makers in Warsaw to varying degrees since the end of World War I. The Intermarium is not a uniformed concept, because several versions can be identified based on the characteristics of the relevant historical period and international environment. Accordingly, the geographic boundaries and geopolitical, strategic functions and objectives of the Intermarium changed frequently.

It also contributed to the birth of the so-called *Giedroyc-Mieroszewski doctrine*. The doctrine associated with the names of the Polish writer, lawyer and political activist Jerzy Giedroyc (1906–2000) and the Polish writer and publicist Juliusz Mieroszewski (1906–1976) was born in an emigrant environment of Paris during the Cold War. Its long-term goal was the federalization of East-Central Europe and the “reconciliation” of Warsaw and the normalization of its foreign policy relations with Kiev, Minsk and Vilnius, with the support of the USA, which replaced the EU as a superpower on the continent (Kaminski & Frenkel, 2019). Nowadays, this attitude functions as a defining guiding principle of the governments following the regime change in 1989 (Lagzi, 2011).

During its history, Poland was partitioned three times by the surrounding great powers (1772: Russia, Prussia, Austria; 1793: Russia, Prussia; 1795: Russia, Prussia, Austria). During the 20th century, after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939), it also lost its independence, so it can be considered as the Fourth Partition of Poland. Based on these disasters in a geopolitical sense (e.g. loss of sovereignty, territorial losses), since the 18th century, Polish statehood has

always suffered from being located between the actual German and Russian sphere of influence. A detailed historical, military and diplomatic exploration of the main reasons and moments of this would stretch the scope of the publication. However, the historical experience of “strategic defeat” is a fundamental element of Warsaw’s geopolitical mindset, because the experiences and memories of Berlin and Mosco’s World War II aggression contributed to the development of Polish national identity (Talaga, 2018).

Classical geopolitical and geostrategic theories (e.g. Raum-Lebensraum, pan-regions, Pivot and Heartland theses, Rimland) positioned Poland both as part of a great power sphere of influence and as a collision zone (Ratzel, 1897; Mackinder, 1904; 1919; Haushofer, 1931; Spykman, 1944). The mentioned status and aspect did not change significantly in geopolitical theories after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War era (e.g. Huntington, 1996; Dugin, 1996; 2015; Friedman, 2015), and they were supplemented with a more characteristic civilizational content and ideological approach.

In Poland, following the third partition, scientific works were published that dealt with the ideal spatial framework of the Polish state, its specific (and partly determining) natural and socio-geographical conditions, as well as its possible strategic objectives (Czartoryski, 1830; Żebrowski, 1847; Pol, 1869; Dmowski, 1908; Nałkowski, 1912). With the exception of Roman Dmowski (1864–1939), they mainly identified Russia as the most important actor threatening the independence and security of the Polish state, due to its westward imperial ambitions. After the World War I, Poland regained its independence in 1918. Since the end of the 18th century, the international and regional political environment has completely changed. However, the great geopolitical powers of Germany and Russia remained and were transformed. Czarist Russia fell, and after the Bolshevik takeover, the Soviet Union was created.

The *Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* (Rzeczpospolita), which is believed to embody the “golden age” of the Polish nation, can be identified as the historical alignment and idealization point of the Intermarium concepts (Jureńczyk, 2021). The state existed in its original form between 1569 and 1795 and it reached its biggest territorial extent in the 16th century, when it covered a larger area than Belgium, the Netherlands and France combined at that time. Nevertheless, in the Western perspective of history, it is only considered as a peripheral borderland or a space between civilizations together with its wider environment (Chodakiewicz, 2012). However, it still determines Warsaw’s geopolitical thinking and influences individual political decision-makers (Nowak, 2004).

Due to the changes in the immediate geopolitical environment defining Poland (which characterized the turbulent period following World War I), the ideas were constantly being adapted and developed. Their goal was to defend the independent statehood achieved again in 1918 against the National Socialist and Soviet empire-building efforts, and in this context, the expansion of Warsaw's influence in Central and Eastern Europe between the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Seas (Paczkowski, 2003). Another common point of the concepts is that their spatial focus mostly covered the northern and central parts of Central and Eastern Europe, a significant part of the territory of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Their goal was to organize the region without the influence of external great powers, relying on the opportunities offered by internal resources and relationship/cooperation systems and the common historical past and culture (Kurecic, 2018).

It was promoted at state level in Poland between the two world wars by Marshal and statesman Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935), whose main ideological driving force and ethos was the so-called *Prometheism*, which was a vision of the liberation of peoples living under Russian oppression, in practice the dismemberment of the territory of the Soviet Union (Schmidt, 2012). There was no concrete policy document about the Intermarium, but rather it existed only in the context of political discourse and long-term governmental foreign policy agendas and was typically of a military/defensive nature. Loose federalisation plans, although originating from its former core areas, extended beyond the territory of the former Polish-Lithuanian Union and stretched from Scandinavia to Greece, with the addition of the Caucasus region (Fedorenko et al., 2022).

The *Third Europe* Plan (Trzecia Europa) associated with the name of Minister of Foreign Affairs Józef Beck (1894–1944) originally advocated the deepened cooperation of Poland, Hungary and Romania (Łukasiewicz, 2010). Its purpose was a reaction to the *power bloc* processes in Europe in the 1930s (the Western bloc led by the French, the fascist bloc led by the Germans, and the rise of the Soviet Union). Beck considered cooperation to be an inevitable trend for the states located in the region bordered by the three seas due to the strengthening of external great power actors (Schmidt, 2012), the framework of which cooperation would have been primarily geographical in nature (Nałęcz, 2019). However, the internal ethnic, ideological and political tensions in the region of Central and Eastern Europe have made it impossible to establish stable and holistic relations and to involve other countries in the cooperation (Crețu, 2018).

At the beginning of the Second World War, National Socialist Germany and the Communist Soviet Union invaded Poland, which at the end of the war completely fell into the Soviet sphere of interest. This also meant the collapse of the geopolitical function of one of the key regions appearing in Mackinder's Heartland theory in 1919 (in the so-called *Strategic addition*: small states extending from the Baltic to the southern part of the Balkan Peninsula to separate Germany and Russia), as the states here were unable to stop the Russian and German conquest. Their role as a buffer zone in the Heartland theory completely ceased by the end of World War II. However, today's Russian-Ukrainian full-scale war has highlighted that the states here still play an important role in the geopolitical and defense approach of NATO and the EU (Wu & Ding, 2024). The narrative of the Intermarium can also serve to prevent the "eternal" position between Berlin and Moscow and the fragmentation characteristic of the region (Bartoszewicz, 2021).

Conclusions

The similarity between the Intermarium concepts and the Three Seas Initiative is that both ideas were born in an uncertain, unpredictable and turbulent geopolitical environment from a Polish point of view. In the case of the former, the direct military threat from Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union between the two world wars, while in the case of the latter, the Russo-Ukrainian war (which appeared in the form of specific military operations in eastern Ukraine in 2014 and escalated into a full-scale war in 2022), provided the general conditions for its creation. Nowadays, Poland has been a part of the Euro-Atlantic alliance for almost three decades, and as a member of the EU and NATO, it does not have to count on military threats from the West. Berlin can still be identified as a kind of rival of the Polish state, but mostly in an economic and geoeconomic sense. However, Moscow's efforts to recreate the international order also represents a hard power type of challenge for Warsaw. The former eastern-oriented security/defense policy and military "problem" of the Intermarium still exists (formerly Soviet, today Putin's Russian).

In the case of Intermarium, it had a more definite and open ideological background (Prometheism), while 3SI refrains from ideologically based policy-making, because only general mainstream phrases are included in its Joint Declarations (e.g. protection of human rights and democracies) and the security. Instead

of the military and defense approaches of Intermarium, it encourages pragmatic approach and mutually beneficial economic development plans.

Both projects serve as informal and diplomatic cooperation frameworks, however, the 3SI doesn't strive for a higher level of institutionalization. The Intermarium formulated larger-scale federalization plans based on the model of the Polish-Lithuanian Union. On the other hand, the 3SI officially avoids the promotion of Polish hegemony (for example the entire project was founded and announced with the Croatian head of state). The advantage of this is that it can potentially reduce concerns about Warsaw's influence, but at the same time, without a specific leading state, it is difficult to unite initiatives and show direction to the member states. Their territorial focus is roughly the same, both ideas basically focus on the region bounded by the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Seas and pragmatically try to form the circle of participating states from their own point of view (e.g. the Caucasus region appears as a potential alliance in both cases). In terms of geopolitics, however, both Intermarium and 3SI are forced to navigate in a classic geopolitical collision zone and "hot spot", which is typically filled by small states and different ethnicities, and where the discovery and enforcement of common interests is considered as a difficult task.

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Międzymorze: geopolityczna narracja inicjatywy Trójmorza (3SI)

STRESZCZENIE W 2015 r. Polska uruchomiła własny projekt geoekonomiczny na dużą skalę, Inicjatywę Trójmorza (3SI), do której od tego czasu dołączyło 12 innych państw członkowskich UE. Dzięki tej holistycznej współpracy zidentyfikowano wiele potrzeb w zakresie rozwoju gospodarczego i infrastrukturalnego, a geograficznymi granicami 3SI są Morze Bałtyckie, Adriatyckie i Czarne (region Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej). Po rosyjskiej inwazji wojskowej na Ukrainę w 2022 r. wzrosło globalne znaczenie geopolityczne tego regionu i inicjatywy. W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano, w jaki sposób historyczne koncepcje Intermarium znajdują odzwierciedlenie w celach 3SI oraz jakie są główne podobieństwa i różnice między tymi dwoma projektami geopolitycznymi.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE Inicjatywa Trzech Mórz, Trójmorze, Polska, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia, geopolityka, geoekonomia

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