



Perspectives for Partnership and Security under the Vision of the Three Seas Initiative

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Abstract: Regional cooperation represents an important component of the geostrategic dimension of states in a certain region. The role of states and regional organizations in international relations covers the topic of security, in all its dimensions, and the form of regional security initiatives or formats. The current context of the invasion of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine, led the states in the immediate vicinity, as well as the security organizations, to redefine their action, in a geopolitical logic, in the field of cooperation, including in the field of defense, for the management of external crises in the neighborhood. The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) represents one of these regional security formats, and Romania hosted the eighth Summit in September 2023, being the only state out of the 12-member states to host an I3M Summit for the second time. Hybrid threats and the current global security context led states to identify tools to provide and guarantee effective defense capabilities. The study aims to analyse the factors that determined the decision to host the 3SI Summit this year in Romania, considering the situation in the eastern neighborhood. At the same time, it is necessary an analysis the implications of this event, starting from the 2022 3SI Summit in Riga, after which Ukraine became a partner state participating in this initiative in the process of strengthening resilience. Can the 3SI format be considered, in this context, a launching pad for the rapid integration into the European structures of the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia?

Keywords: hybrid threats; geostrategy; security; cooperation; regional formats 3SI

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1. Introduction

International security is under serious threat in today's context from a wide variety of elements that are in a continuous process of improvement. War is "*the nightmare of an international order that promotes peace and security*" (Hass, 2021, p. 348). Forms of cooperation are those that guarantee security for participating states through the instruments at their disposal, such as the peaceful settlement of international disputes, but what happens when the international dispute escalates into military conflict? How can the international system cope with a major player on the world stage when the principles of international law are violated? What can states do to guarantee the security and stability of their citizens?

Some scholars (Björn-Ola, 2023, pp. 13-16; Biscop, 2023, pp. 10-11; Kochtcheeva, 2023, pp. 161-164) see a transformation in the concept of world order, influenced by two trends: "*a redefinition of legitimacy or a significant shift in the balance of power*" (Kissinger, 2021, pp. 381-391). Therefore, the uncertainty of foreign policy has led the international system to reassess the concept of world order, reported by establishing behaviour and trends in different regions, thus emerging the concept of regional order, which is interlinked and subsequently aligned to form the new world order.

In this sense, regional cooperation formats are those which can represent the interests of participating states, sometimes consisting of smaller, or less developed, states than in global organisations. Moreover, the specificity of the region can allow states to identify and communicate more effectively and efficiently the risks, threats, and vulnerabilities in the region, and close cooperation between them based on the specific needs of the states can guarantee more evident success.

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) was launched in 2016 at the proposal of Poland and Croatia, which is based on the pooling of the economic efforts of the less developed states of Eastern Europe, which today includes 12 participants, from the area between the Baltic Sea, the Adriatic Sea and the Black Sea. As some experts (Schmidt, 2023, pp. 165-168, Jakoubek, 2023) have described them, the countries participating in the 3SI are from the eastern part of the former 'Iron Curtain', and today the 12 are the most recent members of the most important structures for the European continent, namely the North Atlantic Alliance or the European Union. From this perspective, all 3SI participating states have a special geostrategic role: on the one hand, they cover continental Europe, which separates the two powers,

Germany and Russia, and on the other hand, they are key pawns in the relationship with Russia and Ukraine. Thus, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia are states that are always under Russian threat because of the Russian minorities on their territories, but which rely on economic and security support through their membership in NATO and the EU. Further, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia have distinguished themselves with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 by their unwavering economic and military equipment support. However, the situation of the four countries' dependence on different poles of power is problematic: Slovakia is a member of the Eurozone and dependent on EU funds, Hungary is dependent on Russian energy and is, therefore, more reserved in its aid to Ukraine, the Czech Republic is dependent on economic aid from Germany and the EU. Finally, Romania, Croatia, and Bulgaria play a strategic role as transit countries between Asia and Europe and are also NATO members (Jakoubek, 2023).

However, political leaders and specialists in the field of foreign policy and international relations rank the Three Seas Initiative as the most important political and economic initiative in Central and Eastern Europe in the last 50 years (Anthony, 2021), which can play a major geostrategic role in identifying risks, vulnerabilities of smaller states in the region, interconnectivity being their basic tool for a united voice in the international arena.

2. I3M Riga Summit 2022

The Three Seas Initiative Summit and Business Forum took place in Riga on 20-21 June 2022. Based on the unstable geopolitical context, the Riga Summit remains relevant in the history of this initiative, with several important decisions being taken on this occasion. Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and the violation of international law principles were the starting point for the analysis of the 12 Presidents of the Initiative for the debates on European and global stability and security at the Summit. The main instrument proposed remains the enhanced cooperation of states, especially in the implementation of strategic projects, with a particular emphasis on pursuing the objective of the initiative, i.e., increasing the cohesion of the European Union (Codreanu, 2023, pp. 99-102). Another relevant aspect of the Riga Summit is the invitation of Ukraine to the Summit as a partner of the Initiative, thus starting the process of participation, together with the other 12 states, giving a clear message of its support in the EU accession process. The leaders of the 12 states support Ukraine's recovery and underline the importance of

the 3SI, even more so from now on in the field of foreign affairs and security, representing a possible pillar of crisis management in the Eastern area¹. At the same time, it has opened up to new partners with whom the initiative shares common values and interests, and new regional and global players may participate in the future. The US has been supported in strengthening transatlantic ties and regional stability, particularly through its economic presence for the Initiative².

3. I3M Perspectives

Economic growth in the region-specific to the states participating in the Three Seas Initiative may be the best solution for the development of the region. Still, most importantly, it represents an open door for cooperation and development of the states neighbouring the Russian Federation, rooted in ex-Soviet ideologies, stretching between the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea. The sustained effort of these states can be a springboard to attempt a slight economic rapprochement with the more developed Western European states. Indeed, the initiative's most important goals are based on enhanced cooperation to develop energy, transport, and digital infrastructure. All the more so, in the current context of worrying dependence on Russia's resources, a regional format that brings together the desire for the development of states located between a security-threatened region with similar vulnerabilities and interests can only be more effective through such an example. Similarly, it can be also associated with the Bucharest 9 (B9) Format, both demonstrating a consolidated effort, a unanimous voice, which can be a strong voice in alliances or organizations whose aim is to guarantee international peace and security, as we can illustrate in the case of NATO, focused on the security of the Eastern flank (Zgorzelski, 2022).

The Three Seas Initiative is also an important step in attracting more tangible support from other partners, the most important of which is the United States. The threats to the region are felt throughout the international system, with Russia's influence on the one hand and China's aspirations for Europe on the other. This is why the US can support the investments proposed by the 12-state initiative, and the benefits of supporting this region and initiative are some known to Americans and

¹ "Three Seas Initiative – Joint Declaration of the Seventh Three Seas Summit", accessed on: 25.07.2023, <https://www.presidency.ro/en/media/press-releases/joint-declaration-of-the-seventh-three-seas-initiative-summit>.

² *Idem*.

preferred by businesses: strengthening infrastructure and connectivity, and cyber security. This is why political leaders regularly, especially at the Riga Summit, call on the US government for stronger support for the initiative to define their strategic commitment more clearly (Anthony, 2021).

4. Romania and the I3M Summit 2023

In September 2023, Romania hosted the eighth 3SI Summit, the first of the 12 countries participating in the initiative to host a Summit for the second time. The questions that arise are: is there a reason for one country to organise a second summit for this initiative when there are other countries that have not yet organised one? Did the meeting of the 12 political leaders in Bucharest have a geostrategic role, perhaps in view of the ongoing conflict in the immediate neighbourhood?

Former Romanian Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu spoke in Munich on the sidelines of the February 2023 Security Conference about the organisation of this year's I3M Summit in Romania. On this occasion, Aurescu underlined the growing relevance of this initiative also from a geostrategic perspective, stressing the need to strengthen political support and the Investment Fund. In this regard, he listed projects of interest to the initiative, which are intended to encourage north-south interconnectivity in Europe. Romania supports the I3M projects of interest to the country, such as the "Rail2Sea" and "Via Carpathia Road" and rail infrastructure projects, both of which are of particular relevance to trade, imports, and exports, but most importantly, vital for "military mobility", given Romania's position about the current ongoing conflict¹.

Romania has a particular interest in participating in this regional format, as evidenced by its past practice of "pursuing a watered-down form of isolationist policy" yet being sufficiently present and active in various forms of regional or international cooperation. Romania's interest, according to its geostrategic position, is to get as close as possible to the West, especially to the US, because of the risks coming from the East. A new commitment from the US government would guarantee not only economic development but also security in the region, with the Three Seas Initiative having the prospects of a security policy instrument from its perspective (Kornis, 2022).

¹ Press release, Participation of Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu in the Munich Security Conference, 17.02.2023, <https://www.mae.ro/node/61091>.

Another perspective promoted by the Three Seas Initiative and encouraged by Romania, is that the Riga Summit of the 3SI in 2022 will certainly be the extension of the initiative by the participation of Ukraine, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova, together with the 12 countries. The role of the initiative for these three states is to promote and accelerate the EU accession process, fulfilling the conditions of the I3M, especially due to their economic potential. Romania supports their participation to materialize the I3M project, such as the Odessa-Gdansk highway and the Rail2Sea railway network from Romania's Black Sea ports to the Baltic Sea (Jakoubek, 2023).

5. Conclusions

The Three Seas Initiative is a relevant form of regional cooperation through the interconnectivity of participating Central and Eastern European states, linking the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Seas, and promoting economic development. Unfortunately, its road is a long one, with many shortcomings, or a lack of representative international partners, but it is also a project in its infancy, with only 7 years of operation.

Another argument or criticism of this initiative by various experts refers to the lack of alignment between the interests of the states participating in this format. Although common values are sought for common goals, as in any form of inter-state cooperation, there are opinions that the future of this initiative is uncertain. In this respect, the rather tense situation between Romania and Hungary is mentioned. Then there is Hungary's passive position about the support given to Ukraine, while the other states have taken a stand against Russia's action and even want to strengthen efforts towards Ukraine's reconstruction (Kornis, 2022). Another example concerns Poland's dominance in setting the agenda of the 3SI, even though it is one of the founders of this project and among the main donors. Critics suggest that Poland should pay particular attention to the smaller countries in the initiative, as demonstrated by the prioritisation of support for Ukraine in 2022, even though Latvia held the presidency at that time (Wilczek, 2022).

However, the Three Seas Initiative is a regional project that has interesting prospects given the geostrategic position of the participating states, a position that is important for the West as well as for organisations such as NATO or the European Union. The instability of the region or the renewal of the conflict in the

Balkans are just some of the premises that could prompt the American government to intervene with much more present instruments and funds, and it is the support of the United States that can ensure the development of states that until recently were characterised by an ideology contrary to the ideals of democracy and international peace (Carafano, 2022).

The 3SI Summit hosted by Romania in September had a rich agenda. We believe that it is not by chance that Romania has been chosen to organise this Summit, which this time focused on two primary objectives, namely economic considerations and, more recently, regional security. The conflict in the Eastern neighbourhood may even be the reason why the 3SI will open the door to new partnerships with major players such as Germany, the US, Japan, France, and the UK.

The conclusions of the Bucharest Summit provide, as in the conclusions of the NATO Summit in Vilnius 2023, enhanced security guarantees for the states in the region and for Ukraine. One item on the agenda of the Bucharest Summit, in a broader context, was the proposals for observer, associate, or partner status for Ukraine, Georgia, or the Republic of Moldova, and to speed up their accession to European structures, Romania being supporter of their integration into the EU and the EU (Codreanu, 2023, pp.99-100).

The effort of the 3SI is noted by various international actors and has the potential to develop into a regional or international organisation. The Parliamentary Forum and the Civil Society Forum created in 2021 and 2022 respectively are steps towards the institutionalisation of this format, which can develop and attract bigger participants (Carafano, 2022).

In the current context, the 3SI plays a key role in defining the economic and security strategies of the countries in the region. Moreover, it can be a springboard for promoting other small states in the region, which by belonging to this initiative can break away from dependence on Russia, a message that the whole community is trying to convey. The 3SI will certainly also play a significant role in Ukraine's post-conflict reconstruction process.

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