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### The United States on the Three Seas Initiative

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# The United States on the Three Seas Initiative

**Summary:** In this paper, the U.S. stance under the administration of President Donald Trump with regard to the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) is analysed. It shows the importance of Central and Eastern Europe in U.S. foreign and security policy, concluding that the Americans treat the TSI as an instrument for achieving their own goals, especially those in energy policy.

**Keywords:** U.S., Donald Trump, Three Seas Initiative, Poland, foreign policy, security policy, energy policy, Russia, China

## Introduction

The term 'Three Seas Initiative' (TSI) has been mentioned recently in numerous ways by most of the political class in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in many scientific studies<sup>1</sup>. For some observers of contemporary international relations, this international political and economic initiative is at most an expression of the aspirations of countries such as Poland to become more independent in the international

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system while building a coherent structure in the region of Central Europe, allowing them to make up for the development lag and catch up with Western European countries. The president of Poland, Andrzej Duda, was among those who referred to the so-called ‘creation’ of the effect of cooperation. During the summit in Brda near Ljubljana, Slovenia, he said: ‘We want to catch up with the west of Europe in terms of infrastructure, and at the same time create better opportunities for entrepreneurs and tourists for communication, transport, development, including economic (...) and to ensure energy security’<sup>2</sup>. As the initiator of the TSI, President Duda declared that the initiative is not intended to have a geopolitical character, as it is often compared to the famous Intermarium concept. First and foremost, it should be of an infrastructural and economic nature, materialised in, for example, the Via Baltica and Via Carpatia projects, though fitted into the concept of Polish foreign policy after 2015<sup>3</sup>. In other words, it is expected to lead to a significant deepening of integration in selected strategic sectors of the economies of the TSI member states. Hence, some commentators are wondering about the sense of deeper integration in a group of only 12 countries, considering that they are all EU member states. There were even questions in media if the TSI would replace the European Union?<sup>4</sup> The overarching question is whether this initiative is only an attempt by the Polish authorities to build an international position, wishing to increase their importance in the region and at the same time to weaken Germany, aims which are not entirely in the interest of other EU member states. In this context, writer Ziemowit Szczerek drew attention to the case of the Czech Republic. He wrote in the weekly *Polityka* (Politics) that, ‘the Czechs announced that they do not want to participate in any project that is a manifestation of Polish pretensions to lead in the region aimed at Germany. Moreover, it seems that from the Czech perspective, as Foreign Minister Lubomir Zaoralek put it, it is better to be a ‘bridge’ between illiberal Central Europe and the West than part

2 B. Bodalska, ‘Inicjatywa Trójmorza zdynamizuje swoje działania’, *Euractiv.pl*, <https://www.euractiv.pl/section/instytucje-ue/news/inicjatywa-trojmorza-zdynamizuje-swoje-dzialania/> [2019-06-12].

3 For more, see: M. Sienkiewicz, ‘Konceptja Trójmorza w polityce zagranicznej Polski po 2015 roku’, *Dyplomacja i Bezpieczeństwo*, no. 1, 2016, pp. 139-151.

4 ‘Trimarium zamiast Unii Europejskiej?’, *Onet.pl*, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/trojmorze-zamiast-unii-europejskiej/cyldxt> [2019-06-12].

of the former (...) But Prague is pragmatic, it knows its regional importance, and realizes that the legacy of Central Europe is largely the legacy of German empires, and accepts this. The 10 million people in the Czech Republic do not aspire to be 'equal to other great European countries'<sup>5</sup>. The TSI may turn out to be a blow to German interests, as evidenced by the fact that Germany has recently become more interested in the Polish proposal<sup>6</sup>. The beneficiary of a hypothetical worse position for Germany will be Russia and, of course, the U.S., which has recently shown a great deal of support for this initiative.

It seems that the Americans see their involvement in terms of keeping control over the development of the situation in the Central European region, especially in the context of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), ultimately deepening China's cooperation with the countries of the region. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to analyse the American position on the Polish TSI. The structure of the study, apart from this introduction, also includes an attempt to show the significance of Central Europe in U.S. foreign and security policy and the place the TSI occupies in this policy.

## **1** • **Central and Eastern Europe and U.S. foreign and security policy**

Donald Trump, who has been the president of the U.S. since 20 January 2017, is one of a few American leaders who eagerly follows the 'America first' principle<sup>7</sup>. From the perspective of more than two years in office, it can be seen that this principle is the most important determinant in U.S. foreign and security policy. Examples include the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement by the American president, who believes that it is harmful to his country's economy. What is important, while making these kinds of decisions, is that President Trump did not and does not consider the international consequences or perception of the U.S. in the world. In his opinion, America is such a huge and strong state that it should not question itself, rather focus on its own interests. This formula

5 Z. Szczerek, 'Trójmorze – odpowiedź na Unię dwóch prędkości', *Polityka*, 27 June 2017.

6 M. Dahl, op. cit., pp. 67-69.

7 For more, see: 'Stany Zjednoczone: 'America First' według Donalda Trumpa', *Rocznik Strategiczny*, 2017/2018, pp. 183-201.

is confirmed by the new U.S. Security Strategy, which some commentators describe as ‘peace through strength’<sup>8</sup>. When presenting the public assumptions in this document, President Trump talked about a newly emerging international competition, and a novelty in the assumptions was a reference to economic issues primarily favourable to the Americans. This seems to be the main driving force behind the American involvement in Central Europe. An example of this economic activity and competition is the American attitude to Russia’s position in the Central European region in the context of natural gas sales. It should be noted that Central Europe imports dozens of billion cubic metres of natural gas annually, and the main supplier is, of course, Russia. For the U.S., Central Europe is a very large potential market and one where it has hardly been present until recently. The chance of weakening Russia’s position on this market is even greater because countries such as Poland have been talking for many years about the need for greater diversification of energy supplies. Key to this is their implementation of plans to accept this gas, for example, Poland, which has built a gas terminal in Świnoujście to receive American liquefied natural gas (LNG)<sup>9</sup>. Polish state firm PGNiG has signed agreements with two producers from the U.S. – Port Arthur LNG and Venture Global LNG – which will supply gas to Poland, enough for over a quarter of the country’s consumption. This is a very clear Polish-American blow to the interests of Russia, which terminated the Yamal contract in 2022. For a long time, Poland has been complaining about high prices and unequal treatment by Russia, which resulted in arbitration proceedings against Gazprom before a Stockholm tribunal regarding price renegotiation.

The Americans, like hardly anyone, can sense the mood in Central and Eastern Europe, even though they do not take specific or decisive action (for example, Georgia and Ukraine and the lack of any effective U.S. moves). However, one instance of action is the deep concern for American economic interests as seen in Washington’s attitude to the

8 “Pokój przez siłę. Nowa strategia bezpieczeństwa USA”, *Defence24.pl*, <https://www.defence24.pl/pokoj-przez-sile-nowa-strategia-bezpieczenstwa-usa> [2019-06-13].

9 In July 2019, the implementation of a long-term contract for gas supplies from the United States began. For more, see: A. Kublik, ‘Mamy na dekady skroplony gaz z USA. A ceny są rekordowo niskie’, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 25 July 2019; J. Frączyk, ‘Gigantyczna umowa PGNiG. Gaz z USA zastąpi rosyjski’, *Money.pl*, <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/wiadomosci/artykul/pgnig-gaz-Ing-usa-port-arthur-venture-global,11,0,2409739.html> [2019-05-14].

German-Russian Nord Stream II project. According to the Americans, this gas pipeline is a political project that increases Europe's dependence on Russian gas supplies and also increases Russia's ability to use energy dominance in Europe as a political asset. In other words, greater energy dependence equals more political dependence. The Americans are well aware that this state of affairs does nothing but undermine the position of U.S. allies in the region, like Poland, and that it ultimately will harm American interests in Central Europe. It cannot be denied that some Central European countries have counted heavily on U.S. support to condemn the German-Russian project. The Americans have not been completely indifferent to these requests. The U.S. has created, among others, legal tools to impose sanctions on entities that violate its interests. An example is the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) of 2017. In the context of Nord Stream II, it authorises the president to impose sanctions on Russian companies involved in the construction of this investment<sup>10</sup>. So far, however, apart from some declarations and maintaining a position of possibly introducing sanctions, it is difficult to see the application of this law in practice in the context of Nord Stream II. It is not clear, however, if the American interests are violated, whether the U.S. administration will use this provision in the context of the Nord Stream II project, either to drastically raise the costs of building it or to increase pressure on EU institutions. It seems, however, that it is just the beginning of the American 'gas game' and it will be developing more in the beginning of 2020.

Central and Eastern Europe is also important to the U.S. in terms of security. A number of countries from this part of Europe are also members of the North Atlantic Alliance. It should be noted, however, that the specifics of American involvement in Europe have changed since Trump took office as president. First of all, the new administration's actions have led to a clear deterioration in relations with Germany and specifically with Chancellor Angela Merkel. It has not been a strategic crisis, but a financial one. According to the U.S. president, Germany should take greater responsibility for the financing of NATO

10 E. Maurice, 'US yet to push on Nord Stream 2 sanctions', *Euobserver.com*, <https://euobserver.com/energy/141376> [2019-05-17].

and thus more care for security in the region. According to the theory of realism, the weaker and less credible Germany's position in the region is, the more significant the position of the U.S. will be, and not only for countries such as Poland. Central European countries also seem to notice this, especially after the memorable events in Ukraine and basically the lack of American involvement. However, since the start of Trump's presidency, this commitment has taken a completely different form, different goals, and other mechanisms for cooperation with allies. This involvement is primarily to defend American interests in the region (e.g., the energy issues mentioned above) but also to defend American capital. The Polish proposal to pay the Americans for stationing a U.S. Army division in Poland was an unprecedented event. It could seem that the authorities in Warsaw have shown that they are trying to strengthen NATO's entire Eastern Flank; however, as media reports suggest, they are doing so outside NATO and are 'getting along' with the U.S. behind the backs of the other Alliance member states<sup>11</sup>. This is not the first case of this type in Poland's recent history<sup>12</sup>. This particular instance shows, however, the helplessness of the European side in ensuring security and represents a blow against NATO and its member states, which corresponds to the American president's narrative about the need for some of them to take greater responsibility for the fate of the Alliance. The task of the American administration, in this case, is to show the irreplaceable role of the U.S. as the only guarantor of security for Europe, able to 'call to order' the other NATO members. While giving a speech in Warsaw, Trump said, 'Words are easy, but actions are what matters. And for its own protection, Europe must do more. Europe must demonstrate that it believes in its future by investing its money to secure that future'<sup>13</sup>.

Another important issue related to U.S. involvement in Central and Eastern Europe is the Chinese BRI. China is boldly seeking the

11 M. Świerczyński, 'Dwa miliardy za dywizję. Polska oferta dla USA jest sensacją w NATO', *Polityka*, 30 May 2018; 'Polska zapłaci miliardy za obecność wojsk USA'. Będziecie zdziwieni, ile płacą Niemcy', *Wp.pl*, <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/polska-zaplaci-miliardy-za-obecnosc-wojsk-usa-bedziecie-zdziwieni-ile-placa-niemcy-6297002229626497a> [2019-05-16].

12 Similar accusations against Poland were made in the years 2005-2007, when the possibility of implementing the U.S.-Polish-Czech missile shield, created outside the North Atlantic Alliance, was discussed.

13 Donald Trump's speech during his visit to Warsaw on July 6, 2017.

attention of Central and Eastern European countries. The financial crisis spurred China's interest in the region, and the related possibility of Chinese influence in Europe seems to be endless, as evidenced by the '17+1' initiative, which is a forum of regional cooperation involving 17 countries in the region and China<sup>14</sup>. In recent years, Beijing has clearly changed the perception of Central and Eastern European countries. It should be noted that many of them have become members of the European Union, but are generally in a weaker position than the countries of the 'fifteen' earlier members. However, China sees in these 'newer' countries a source of influence on European institutions serving Chinese interests. Central and Eastern European countries see in China the investment potential to strengthen the competitiveness of their economies. The Trump administration is trying to hamper this, as the U.S. rivalry with China and limiting the latter's influence in the world have become a feature of American foreign policy. The Americans have so far been relatively restrained when it comes to the Chinese BRI. Frankly speaking, not much has happened with it and it's difficult to talk about any spectacular success. Nevertheless, Washington does not want Beijing to lead in the competition for Central Europe and relatively strongly supports the TSI, as Trump has repeatedly said. Its goals are very much in line with the '17+1' aims and refer to infrastructure and energy issues. However, while within the '17+1' China may be focused on getting along with individual EU member states (following the policy pursued by Russia) and actually breaking apart the EU slowly, in the case of the Americans and their support for the TSI, it is rather the opposite. Considering the countries covered by this Polish concept, it may be more about attempting to drag them to their side (in a strategic sense), without weakening the EU. In fact, the weakening or even hypothetical breakup of the EU is bad for the Americans in the long run, even though Trump often disagrees with it<sup>15</sup>.

Since then-Secretary of State Hilary Clinton announced the U.S. 'pivot' towards Asia, the U.S. has been starting to look more closely at Eu-

14 For more, see: A. Chojan, 'Zaangażowanie Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Polski', in: J.M. Fiszler (ed.), *Unia Europejska – Chiny w XXI wieku*, Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2018, pp. 153-172.

15 M. Zawadzki, 'Donald Trump: NATO jest przestarzałe, UE się rozpadnie, będziemy robić interesy z Rosją', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 16 January 2017.



rope and what is happening there. First of all, the U.S. sees a chance for itself, very specifically in line with the 'America First' principle. Criticizing European NATO countries as to the level of financing or expenditure on armaments, the U.S., the world's largest arms exporter, shows it cares about its own interests, and this is often emphasized by Trump. It is difficult to say during Trump's presidency that a U.S. strategic goal in Central and Eastern Europe is to neutralise Russia, even though sanctions have been imposed in succession. The sanctions do not exert too much influence on the Russian authorities. Therefore, one should think more about why the Americans have such a positive attitude to the TSI concept and the consequences it will bring for all parties.

## **2. The U.S. on the TSI: Is it simply about interests?**

It is difficult to assume that the U.S., as a state that approaches international relations in a very pragmatic way, would predetermine the success of the TSI and benefit from it. Nevertheless, at least declaratively, the U.S. appreciates the fact of the initiative's existence and the desire of Central European countries to strengthen cooperation, which, moreover, was emphasized by Trump himself at the TSI Summit in Warsaw in 2017. In his speech, the president very clearly expressed his expectations for how the initiative would operate: 'In a spirit of hope, we are all joining together here and this historic assembly is to launch a new future for the open market of cheap energy, which will bring greater security and prosperity to all our citizens. We are sitting on huge energy resources, at the moment we are energy exporters, therefore, regardless of when you need it, just call us. We stand side by side with the Three Seas countries' and further, 'the United States of America also supports the creation of the Three Seas business forum so that your countries could build the latest projects with the best talents in the energy sector and do so below cost and ahead of time (...)'<sup>16</sup>. The entire statement by the American president, referring to the huge development opportunities for the countries of the region thanks to the TSI, was a disguise for the implementation of American economic interests, mainly those related to energy and

16 Donald Trump's speech during his visit to Warsaw on July 6, 2017.

the broadly understood energy security. Not without reason, Trump talked about the LNG terminal on the Croatian island of Krk, the supply of this raw material to Poland, and finally the implementation of this longed-for diversification of energy supplies.

Trump's presence at the TSI summit in 2017 was no accident. This event fit in perfectly with the American administration's strategy towards Central and Eastern Europe and is based on the desire to push Russia out of first place as an exporter of energy resources. It should be noted that almost all of the countries covered by the TSI are seeking to reduce energy dependence on Russia. As experts point out, for a large number of TSI countries, natural gas imports from Russia account for over 75% of their demand<sup>17</sup>, and some countries are 100% dependent on these imports, as is illustrated in the table below.

**Table 1: Summary of the data on the consumption, import, and percentage of Russia's share of natural gas imports in TSI countries**

	Consumption	Import	Import from Russia	Russia's share of imports
	bcm	bcm	bcm	%
EU	491	360	194.4	54
Austria	9.00	9.14	9.14	100
Bulgaria	3.20	3.33	3.33	100
Croatia	2.70	1.73	1.73	100
the Czech Republic	8.40	8.50	5.80	68
Estonia	0.50	0.50	0.50	100
Lithuania	2.20	2.75	1.48	54
Latvia	1.24	1.24	1.24	100
Poland	17.70	14.70	10.47	71
Romania	11.90	1.40	1.19	85
Slovakia	4.50	5.27	4.59	87
Slovenia	0.90	0.87	0.60	69
Hungary	9.90	8.20	8.20	100

Note: bcm = billion m<sup>3</sup>.

Source: 'Gaz i transport. Potencjał Trójmorza w liczbach', *Biznesalert.pl*, <https://biznesalert.pl/gaz-transport-trojmorze-analiza/> [2019-05-17].

17 M. Martewicz, 'Poland Sees Trump Visit Catalyst to Cut Russian Gas Reliance', *Bloomberg.com*, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-07-04/poland-seeks-trump-visit-catalyst-to-cut-reliance-on-russian-gas> [2019-06-14].

In a time of deep distrust of Russian foreign and security policy, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are looking for greater space for cooperation in the field of energy security, which they have been openly talking about for years. In turn, the U.S. in February 2016 launched its first LNG export terminal, from which only 13.1% of American LNG went to Europe. For the U.S. administration, this is definitely not enough, and according to the Wood Mackenzie analytical centre, the volume of gas sales to Europe by 2035 is expected to increase to 60%<sup>18</sup>. Because the TSI is an infrastructure and economic initiative to the Americans, it is impossible not to notice their increased involvement, for example, in helping with the implementation of the Croatian LNG terminal on Krk<sup>19</sup>. Like the terminal in Świnoujście, it has very important strategic importance for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as it is supposed to enable the implementation of the North-South Gas Corridor, equipped with appropriate infrastructure enabling the transmission of natural gas (implicitly, American natural gas). Not without reason, Trump in his speech in Warsaw mentioned both Croatia and Poland, clearly emphasizing their role in this undertaking.

The TSI, as viewed by some analytical centres such as the Atlantic Council, is perceived as a 'true 21<sup>st</sup>-century security project'<sup>20</sup>. It is believed that the creation of appropriate infrastructure in the field of communication, energy, and transport will unite the countries of the TSI, and indirectly will also be an effective response to Russia's dominant role in the energy sector. The Trump administration is very keen on the latter issue. The fact that Russia uses energy as an instrument of pressure on the countries of the region, and at the same time is also a source of real threat for them, is an open secret. Russia is still a threat also to the U.S., despite the relatively positive narrative expressed by Trump. This common thing, that is, the form of the Russian threat, is highlighted by, among others, Gen. James L. Jones (ret.): 'the way in which Central and Eastern Europeans look at the world and the threats

18 '2035: The evolution of a global gas market', *Wood Mackenzie*, <https://www.woodmac.com/news/editorial/2035-global-gas-market/> [2019-06-14].

19 For more, see: M. Seroka, 'Chorwacja bliżej budowy terminalu LNG na wyspie Krk', *Analizy OSW*, 6 February 2019.

20 R. Ansley, 'Making the Three Seas Initiative a Priority for Trump', *Atlantic Council*, 3 May 2017.

that face them is much more aligned with the way that Americans look at the world (...) than our traditional Western European allies<sup>21</sup>. However, it should not be argued that American support for the TSI is anti-Russia. It is pro-USA in nature, but the losses the U.S. may incur in this respect are, at most, of secondary importance. The most important business in Central and Eastern Europe is the most important for the Americans, as Trump indirectly wrote to the participants of the Three Seas Business Forum in Bucharest in September 2018. In his letter, the president confirmed 'the United States' strong support for the Three Seas Initiative and our joint commitment to infrastructure development, improving business relations, strengthening energy security and reducing barriers to free, fair and mutual trade in Central and Eastern Europe<sup>22</sup>.

## Conclusion

U.S. policy towards the TSI takes on the character of President Trump. It can be easily described in one word – business. From the perspective of economic relations and benefits for the American side, its involvement in Central and Eastern Europe should still be analysed. Besides this, the American administration does not negate such an attitude towards the TSI. It seems that U.S. diplomatic efforts will focus on emphasizing the importance of the TSI as an integration project involving a large number of EU member states in terms of using the potential of these countries and their infrastructure while depreciating the Nord Stream II project, which strengthens the position of both Germany and Russia. It should be noted that a significant number of the countries covered by the TSI were relatively critical of Nord Stream I, and this position is maintained in the context of Nord Stream II. By joining in the diplomatic narrative of this project, which is a disguise for the real struggle for energy security of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (gas supplies to Poland, support of Croatia), the U.S. is becoming a valuable 'strategic acquisition' for TSI

21 Ibid.

22 A letter from the President of the United States Donald Trump to the participants of the Business Forum organized on the occasion of the Three Seas Summit in Bucharest in September 2018.

countries, legitimising and confirming the correctness of their decisions. The role of Germany should not go unnoticed. As Martin Dahl writes, 'it is true that the countries of the Three Seas area are states that cooperate with Germany and its allies'<sup>23</sup>. Germany's position in the EU has recently suffered greatly, also influenced by Trump. According to many commentators, the success of the TSI may be a blow to German interests. An open question is whether it is in the interest of Poland, for example, to weaken its Western neighbours in favour of strengthening the position of the U.S. Obviously, this is not an official interpretation of the foreign policy directions of Poland or the other countries of the TSI, but this consequence should be considered by the leading politicians in these countries. With the entire political euphoria associated with the U.S. involvement in the TSI, it should be kept in mind that Trump's energy policy is nothing but the achievement of America's particular interests and the desire to build on its position as an energy power.

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23 M. Dahl, op. cit., p. 66.

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