



The Three Seas Gamble: Can Poland Unite Central Europe?

The British geographer Halford Mackinder viewed Central Europe as critical to geopolitics. Over a century ago, he defined his “Heartland Theory” as follows:

“Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world.”

Poland, the heart of Central Europe, occupies a unique position, as it is both defined and constrained by its geography. Too small to rival Europe’s major powers yet too large to be deemed comparable to its smaller neighbours, the country has ever walked a tightrope.

Poland has achieved one of the fastest and most sustained economic growth trajectories of the 21st century, especially in Europe, emerging as a standout success in post-communist economic transformation.

The legacy of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569 to 1795)—Poland’s golden age during which it wielded great influence over vast swathes of Europe—remains a source of inspiration in contemporary Polish politics. In the 16th and 17th century, the Kingdom of Poland spanned a territory of over 2 million square kilometers, part of which contained modern-day Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia and most of Ukraine.

Then the era of Poland’s partitions (three in total near the end of the 18th century) came when Poland’s powerful neighbours (Russia, Prussia and Austria) cut it up and divided the pieces among each other as if it were a cake. After WWI, the country saw a rebirth when its leader Józef Piłsudski attempted the creation of a Central European federation (also known as the “Intermarium”), which spanned from the Baltics to the Carpathian Basin. His ambitious plans however never materialised.

Today, Poland is once again punching above its weight. The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) aims to transform Poland into a pivotal hub for energy, transportation, and digital connectivity across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). It also aims to deepen cooperation among 12 EU member states situated between the

Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas. With its focus on infrastructure, energy, and digital connectivity, the 3SI offers Poland a platform to lead while amplifying its geopolitical clout.

The 3SI's potential is worth stressing, as it represents about a fourth of the EU's population and about a third of its territory. However, the region falls behind Western Europe when it comes to infrastructure, economic convergence, research, and innovation. Crucially, it is a strategic collaboration of CEE countries with the United States, aiming to reduce reliance on powerful regional players like Germany and Russia.

A cornerstone of the 3SI is the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund (3SIIF), established in 2019 to finance critical infrastructure projects across the region. The Fund pools contributions from member states' development banks and private investors to support energy, transport, and digital projects. Notable examples include Via Carpatia, a transnational highway connecting the Baltic to the Aegean, and Rail Baltica, a high-speed railway linking the Baltic states to Poland and the rest of the EU. These projects aim to enhance north-south connectivity, a historically neglected axis in European infrastructure development.

Why has Poland failed to use its geopolitical leverage to push for further development of the 3SI? The answer is that Poland has already had a hard time consolidating the much smaller Visegrad Group (V4), which was suddenly revived in 2015 amidst the migration crisis. But by 2022, internal disagreements emerged regarding the war between Ukraine and Russia, which made speaking as one impossible. One of the aims of the V4 alliance was to enhance north-south connectivity, yet progress has been remarkably slow. Some exceptions however include the above-mentioned Via Carpatia or Rail Baltica.

China also expanded its influence in CEE through the 16+1 format and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aiming to integrate CEE into its global trade network and gain a foothold in the region. In response, President Donald Trump bolstered the 3SI during his first term, promoting U.S. LNG exports and Western-led investments to strengthen CEE's ties with transatlantic partners.

Different countries means that different strategic interests are at play. The region remains a mosaic of nations and cultures, each with its own particularities. For instance, while Poland and the Baltic States wholeheartedly support Ukraine in its war against Russia, Hungary and Slovakia adopt a more neutral approach.

Poland stands at a crossroads. The 3SI represents both an opportunity and a test of Warsaw's leadership. To succeed, Poland must first define its vision for the 3SI, ensuring that it is more than a collection of infrastructure projects. The country thus requires ambitious leadership and a clearly defined vision. The task seems too complex for PM Donald Tusk's government, which has proven its shortsightedness on many occasions.

The most blatant example of this was the abandonment of a crucial investment as the Central Communication Port. The latter was a major transportation hub planned to be built near Warsaw, and which was intended to integrate air, rail, and road transport, enhancing connectivity within the country and across Europe. Rafał Trzaskowski, the mayor of Warsaw and candidate for President from Tusk's Civic Platform, stated in 2018 that the project is "gigantomania" and wondered "why do we need an airport here [in Poland] when there can be a similar airport built in Berlin in two years?".

The CCP was a flagship project of the previous government led by the Law and Justice (PiS) party. The latter is currently the main opposition party but could get back into power by 2027. A Law and Justice government backed by the new Trump administration could prove to be the magical formula that gets the 3SI project rolling.

For the time being, Poland's grand strategy has remained frustratingly low in ambition. Leadership requires clarity, unity, and action. For the 3SI to become more than a historical footnote, Warsaw must rise to the occasion. It must build coalitions that transcend national interests, crafting a unified regional agenda. Is Poland ready to lead? Or will it wither away, dreaming of what could have been?