



The Impact of the Three Seas Initiative on International Relations and Regional Cooperation

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Abstract. This study aims to explore the multidimensional impact of the Three Seas Initiative on the international relations framework and regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe. The research employs methods such as literature review, case analysis, and comparative study, integrating theories of international relations and regional cooperation to analyze the practical aspects of the Three Seas Initiative. The findings indicate that the initiative has not only improved the transportation, energy, and communication infrastructure in the region but also enhanced the stability and security of regional energy supply through projects like the North-South Energy Corridor. Moreover, member countries of the initiative have gradually increased their influence in international economic organizations, providing a new platform for participation in global economic governance. This study offers insights into the strategic significance of the Three Seas Initiative and provides references for other similar regional cooperation initiatives.

Keywords: Three Seas Initiative; International Relations; Infrastructure Construction; Energy Security; Economic Integration.

1 Introduction

The Three Seas Initiative (TSI), proposed by Poland and Croatia in 2015, encompasses 13 Central and Eastern European countries along the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas^[1]. The initiative aims to enhance the overall competitiveness and integration of the region through cooperation in infrastructure construction, energy security, and economic development^[2]. Central and Eastern Europe holds a significant strategic position in the global geopolitical and economic landscape^[3]; its development not only affects the stability and prosperity of the European Union but also has a profound impact on the global political and economic structure^[4].

This paper aims to investigate the impact of the Three Seas Initiative on the international relations framework and regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe. Employing methods such as literature review, case analysis, and comparative study, and integrating theories of international relations and regional cooperation, this research analyzes the practical aspects of the Three Seas Initiative. By collecting and

analyzing relevant literature, policy documents, and statistical data from recent years, this study examines the initiative's specific practices in infrastructure construction, energy security, economic development, and political cooperation. It reveals the initiative's role in enhancing the economic strength of the region, strengthening regional integration, promoting the integration of the energy market, and reinforcing international relations, thereby providing insights into the strategic significance of the Three Seas Initiative.

2 Overview of the Three Seas Initiative

On August 25, 2016, twelve countries along the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Seas signed the Dubrovnik Declaration in Dubrovnik, Croatia, marking the official establishment of the Three Seas Initiative (TSI). The establishment of the initiative reflects the need for Central and Eastern European countries to seek a sense of agency within the European Union and to form a distinct Central European identity^[5]. It also highlights the urgent infrastructure development needs of these countries. Greece officially joined in 2023, further expanding the initiative's influence^[6].

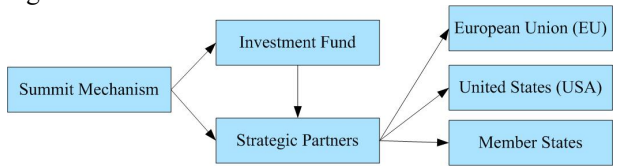


Fig. 1. Architecture Diagram of the Three Seas Initiative Cooperation Mechanism

The Three Seas Initiative Cooperation Mechanism Structure is shown in Figure 1. From Figure 1, it can be seen that the Three Seas Initiative promotes infrastructure construction, energy security, and economic development in Central and Eastern Europe through coordination and cooperation in multiple aspects, including summit mechanisms, investment funds, and strategic partners. The core objective of the Three Seas Initiative is to enhance the connectivity among member states and improve regional economic competitiveness by investing in energy^[7], transportation, and digital infrastructure. Specific areas of cooperation include the construction of the North-South Energy Corridor to diversify energy supply and enhance energy security; the development of transportation infrastructure such as railways, roads, and ports to improve regional connectivity^[8]; and the modernization of communication networks to promote digital transformation.

The Three Seas Initiative advances its goals through regular summits and cooperative projects^[9]. The summit mechanism provides a platform for member states to discuss and coordinate policies, promoting political and economic cooperation within the region^[10]. The initiative has established an investment fund aimed at attracting private sector participation in infrastructure construction. The involvement of strategic partners such as the United States, Germany, and the European Commission has further enhanced the implementation capacity of the initiative.

3 The Impact of the Three Seas Initiative on International Relations

3.1 Impact on the EU's Internal Cohesion

The Three Seas Initiative aims to enhance connectivity among member states by focusing on investments in energy, transportation, and digital infrastructure along the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas. This not only helps to improve the economic level of Central and Eastern Europe but also strengthens its cohesion within the European Union. Despite the significant progress made in promoting cooperation among Central and Eastern European countries, the initiative also faces numerous challenges in the context of different interests and policy divergences within the EU. Some member states have varying specific needs and priorities in areas such as infrastructure construction and energy security, which can increase the difficulty of coordination. Moreover, policy differences and budget allocation issues within the EU may also affect the implementation of the Three Seas Initiative. However, by establishing effective coordination and communication mechanisms, such as regular summits and project coordination groups, these contradictions can be effectively resolved, leading to common development.

3.2 Impact on U.S. -EU Relations

The United States has sought to use the Three Seas Initiative to counterbalance China's influence in the region, playing a significant role and implementing a series of strategies. The U.S. has provided financial support and technical assistance to promote infrastructure projects within the initiative, aiming to expand its influence in Central and Eastern Europe. The European Union's strategic layout in the Three Seas region has shown a wavering attitude towards China, reflecting its balancing strategy in maintaining its own interests and responding to U.S. pressure. On one hand, the EU hopes to enhance the economic strength and infrastructure level of Central and Eastern Europe through the Three Seas Initiative, thereby strengthening the overall competitiveness of the EU. On the other hand, the EU is also striving to avoid damaging its cooperative relationship with China due to U.S. intervention. This balancing strategy has to some extent influenced the direction of U.S.-EU relations, but it also provides the EU with the possibility of maintaining its autonomy in the complex international environment.

3.3 Impact on the China-EU Relationship Framework

Perceptions of China among members of the Three Seas Initiative vary, with some countries, influenced by external factors such as the United States, harboring misunderstandings or biases towards the Belt and Road Initiative, thereby posing certain obstacles to China-EU cooperation. However, countries like Hungary, which actively engage in cooperation with China, have become important fulcrums for the Belt and Road Initiative in Europe, promoting the development of China-EU relations. The

Three Seas Initiative and the Belt and Road Initiative share a high degree of relevance in development concepts and objectives, with immense potential for cooperation in areas such as infrastructure, energy, and trade. Through coordinated cooperation, complementary advantages can be realized, further advancing the development of China-EU relations. For example, the "North-South Energy Corridor" plan advocated by the Three Seas Initiative aligns with the energy interconnectivity development concept proposed by the Belt and Road Initiative. The prospects for cooperation between the two sides in energy infrastructure construction, energy reserves, and consumer markets are broad. This strategic alignment not only helps to enhance the economic level of Central and Eastern Europe but also provides new opportunities and platforms for China-EU cooperation.

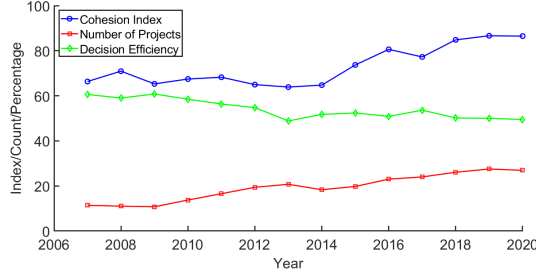


Fig. 2. Architecture Diagram of the Three Seas Initiative Cooperation Mechanism

Table 1. Comparison of U.S. and EU Strategic Initiatives in the Three Seas Initiative

Strategic Goals	United States	European Union
Infrastructure Construction	Provide financial and technical support for infrastructure projects in the region, aiming to enhance energy security and reduce dependence on Russia.	Support infrastructure development through EU funding mechanisms and policy frameworks, focusing on green and digital priorities.
Energy Security	Strengthen energy security by diversifying energy sources and promoting the construction of energy infrastructure, such as the North-South Energy Corridor.	Enhance energy security through the EU's "Third Energy Package" and its anti-monopoly clauses, applying them to Russian energy projects.
Political Cooperation	Use the initiative to counterbalance Chinese influence in the region and promote a unified and prosperous Europe.	Strengthen regional integration and cooperation within the EU, supporting the initiative as part of broader EU policies.

After the implementation of the Three Seas Initiative, the trend of the EU's internal cohesion is shown in Figure 2. The comparison of different strategic initiatives of the U.S. and the EU in the Three Seas Initiative is shown in Table 1. From Figure 2, it can be seen that after the implementation of the Three Seas Initiative, the EU's internal cohesion has significantly strengthened, with a noticeable increase in the number of cooperative projects among member states and the efficiency of joint decision-making.

This trend reflects the positive role of the Three Seas Initiative in promoting cooperation among Central and Eastern European countries and enhancing the overall cohesion of the EU. From Table 1, it can be seen that there are significant differences in strategic goals and specific actions between the U.S. and the EU in the Three Seas Initiative, reflecting the different considerations of both sides in terms of geopolitical and economic interests. The U.S. attempts to expand its influence in Central and Eastern Europe by providing financial and technical support, while the EU focuses more on enhancing the regional economic strength and integration level through infrastructure construction.

4 The Impact of the Three Seas Initiative on Regional Cooperation

4.1 Promotion of Infrastructure Construction in Central and Eastern Europe

The Three Seas Initiative has made significant progress in the construction of transportation infrastructure, with several key projects enhancing the transportation network and regional connectivity in Central and Eastern Europe. The new model emphasizes extensive involvement of various actors. In addition to traditional university administrators and counselors, it actively incorporates student representatives, parent volunteers, and community workers into the governance process. By establishing cross-departmental cooperative networks, it creates a virtuous cycle of resource sharing and information exchange both within and outside the campus, thus promoting the optimal allocation of governance resources.

In the energy sector, the Three Seas Initiative is committed to building a North-South Energy Corridor to diversify energy supply and enhance energy security. Specific projects include the construction of natural gas pipelines and power transmission networks, aimed at reducing dependence on single energy supply channels and improving the stability and security of the regional energy market. The Three Seas Initiative also focuses on the upgrading of communication networks, promoting the construction of 5G networks and the layout of data centers. These measures not only enhance the digital level of Central and Eastern Europe but also promote the transformation and upgrading of the regional economy. By building modern communication infrastructure, Central and Eastern European countries can better integrate into the global digital economy, enhancing the region's innovation capacity and competitiveness.

4.2 Promotion of Energy Market Integration

The energy corridor planned by the Three Seas Initiative, stretching from Croatia and Bulgaria in the south to Estonia in the north, is a significant component of the EU's efforts to build a unified energy market. The construction of this energy corridor aims to break geographical constraints on energy supply, optimize the allocation of energy

resources, and enhance the stability and security of the regional energy market. By connecting energy supply and demand across different regions, the corridor facilitates the diversification of energy supply, reducing dependence on single sources.

Initiative member states have undertaken several innovative measures in the formulation of energy market rules, the construction of energy trading platforms, and cooperation in energy technology research and development. These measures not only increase the degree of integration of the regional energy market but also reduce energy costs and improve energy efficiency. For example, the establishment of a unified energy trading platform enables member states to conduct energy transactions more effectively, optimize resource allocation, and enhance market competitiveness.

In the context of global energy pattern changes and geopolitical conflicts, the Three Seas Initiative strengthens energy cooperation, enhancing members' ability to cope with risks such as energy supply disruptions and price fluctuations. By developing diversified energy supply channels and increasing energy storage capacity, member states can better ensure regional energy security and reduce interference from external factors on energy supply. For instance, the construction of natural gas storage facilities and backup energy supply lines has improved the region's capacity to deal with energy crises.

4.3 Strengthening Economic Cooperation and Trade

The Three Seas Initiative has enhanced economic cooperation among its member states, promoting the free flow and optimal allocation of production factors, and advancing the economic integration process in Central and Eastern Europe. Through infrastructure construction, energy cooperation, and the upgrading of communication networks, economic ties within the region have become increasingly close, narrowing the gap in economic development levels between Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe. The initiative has taken several measures to reduce trade barriers, simplify investment approval procedures, and strengthen intellectual property protection, thereby promoting regional and international trade growth and attracting foreign investment. By establishing unified trade and investment rules, the trade and investment environment among member states has significantly improved, attracting more foreign capital into Central and Eastern Europe. In the manufacturing, agriculture, and technology sectors, member states have achieved synergistic development through industrial transfer, joint research and development, and technical exchanges, enhancing the regional industrial competitiveness. At the same time, innovation cooperation has been promoted, facilitating the transformation and application of scientific and technological achievements.

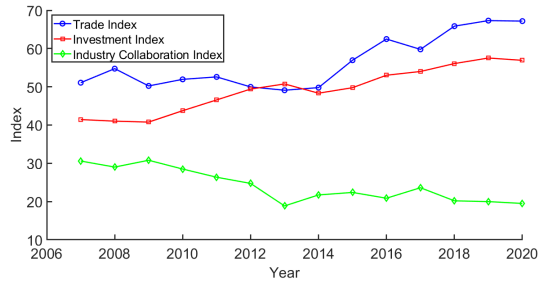


Fig. 3. Central and Eastern Europe Economic Cooperation Trend (2007-2020)

Figure 3 shows the trend of changes in the economic cooperation index in Central and Eastern Europe. From Figure 3, it can be seen that the region has shown a significant upward trend in three key indicators: trade, investment, and industrial collaboration. This indicates that Central and Eastern Europe has successfully enhanced its level of economic cooperation and degree of regional integration through a series of policies and cooperative projects.

4.4 Enhancing the Region's Global Economic Status

The Three Seas Initiative has significantly enhanced the overall economic strength of Central and Eastern Europe through achievements in infrastructure construction, energy cooperation, and economic integration. By improving transportation, energy, and communication infrastructure, economic activities within the region have become more vibrant, and economic competitiveness has been enhanced.

As economic strength increases, member states of the Three Seas Initiative have gradually gained greater voice and influence in international economic organizations and multilateral trade negotiations. Member states are better able to participate in global economic governance and promote the establishment of a more fair and reasonable international economic order. The Three Seas Initiative has created conditions for Central and Eastern Europe to engage in broader and deeper economic cooperation with other regions and countries. By strengthening cooperation with emerging economies in Asia, Africa, and other regions, market space has been expanded, and balanced global economic development has been promoted.

5 Conclusion

The study finds that the Three Seas Initiative has significantly enhanced the economic strength and regional integration level of Central and Eastern Europe by promoting infrastructure construction, advancing energy market integration, and strengthening economic cooperation and trade. In terms of international relations, the initiative has strengthened internal cohesion within the European Union. Despite strategic games in U.S.-EU relations and perceptual differences in China-EU relations, positive progress has been made through effective coordination and cooperation mechanisms.

Although the Three Seas Initiative has made significant progress, it still faces numerous challenges. First, the difficulty of interest coordination among member states is considerable, as different countries have varying specific needs and priorities in areas such as infrastructure construction and energy security, which may lead to coordination difficulties in project advancement. Second, geopolitical intervention by external powers, especially the strategic considerations of the United States, has had a certain impact on the implementation of the initiative. Moreover, financial and technological bottlenecks are also important factors constraining project progress, with some infrastructure construction projects advancing slowly due to insufficient funding or technical difficulties.

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