

Poland and the Three Seas Initiative: Iran's Role in the Energy Security of Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

As the heir to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which once ruled a large swath of Central and Eastern Europe from the Baltic region to today's Ukraine and Slovakia, Poland wants to play a leading role in the emerging institutional architecture in Central and Eastern Europe. In this regard, the issue of energy security is a priority for Poland and likewise other Central and Eastern European countries due to their high dependence on Russia, especially for the majority of their natural gas consumption. The main question of this research is: What role does Iran play in the energy security of Poland and the rest of Central and Eastern European region? The hypothesis of this research states that Iran is positioned as a major potential energy supplier within the Poland-led Three Seas Initiative in Central and Eastern Europe in view of efforts to build an energy-resilient region. The main research question was dealt with using the qualitative approach within the theoretical framework of Thazha Varkey Paul's soft balancing theory. The paper's results indicate that Iran will be an indispensable partner for the geopolitical wing of the Three Seas Initiative and the envisioned Indo-Atlantic maritime route.

Keywords: Regional Initiative, Russia, European Union, Soft Balancing, Central Europe, Germany, Poland.

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Introduction

Despite reports of alleged deliveries of Iranian drones to Russia for use in the ensuing Ukraine war, Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Pawel Jablonski visited Iran on October 8, 2022 as part of the regular Polish-Iranian political consultations. During his visit, he expressed his support for the ongoing talks aiming to achieve a potential breakthrough in the renewal of the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal. Moreover, he called for an increase in trade exchanges between the two countries. Since joining the EU in 2004, Poland has witnessed rapid economic development, leading to a growing demand for energy. Traditionally, this demand has been met by Russia. However, decreasing dependence on Russian gas and energy will not be a straightforward task. It will necessitate a concentrated and persistent policy endeavor across various sectors, alongside robust leadership in the Central and Eastern European region (referred to as CEE). For its part, due to its size, rich history, and economic importance, Poland considers itself a natural leader in the energy infrastructure developments in the region. Such concerted efforts by Poland for a comprehensive energy design pushed the European Union to propose the Trans-European Transport Network in 2013, which is a planned network of roads, railways, airports and water infrastructure in the European Union; Regarding the sourcing of energy supplies, Iran's rich resources and its strategic location, close to the borders of Eastern Europe, has meant that Poland has been trying to rope in Iran in its energy infrastructure design in the CEE. In fact, Iran holds a special position in Poland and its political circles as one of the earliest Middle-Eastern (or West Asian) countries with which Poland established diplomatic and political relations. Additionally, during World War II, Iran provided refuge to tens of thousands of Polish refugees escaping the Soviet Union. Therefore, the main question of this research is: What role does Iran play in the energy security of Poland and the rest of CEE? The hypothesis in this study states that Iran is positioned as a major potential energy supplier within the Poland-led Three Seas Initiative in CEE in view of efforts to build an energy-resilient region. In the following sections, first, the literature review is explored, then the theoretical framework of Paul's soft balancing is discussed, and finally, the importance of Iran within the Poland-led Three Seas initiative will be examined.

Literature Review

Poland's relations with its arch-rival Germany and Russia have been explored in a number of research studies. In fact, the type of illiberal turn in Poland has been connected to its main concerns regarding Germany's increasing hegemonic role inside the European Union. Poland, Hungary and many others in the CEE have opposed the way the EU, under the influence of Germany, has put nationalism as the main culprit of the destructive wars in Europe in the 20th century, while attributing less role to the communism. Criticism of the EU as a political project hijacked by German interests and agenda has become a common theme in Poland and Hungary (Varga and Buzogány, 2021). During the Euro-zone crisis, leaders of the Poland's Law and Justice Party accused the governing party, Civil Platform, of surrendering Polish interests for serving the interests of mighty foreign powers, especially Germany and onset of an EU model based on Germany-influenced monetarism and ratings (Cianciara, 2022). Poland being one of Russia's toughest opponents, has been taking steps to obstruct any rapprochement between the EU and Russia in the foreign and security policy circles of the EU. In connection with the sanctions imposed on Russia as a result of its actions in Georgia and Ukraine, Poland and Baltic states advocated a more aggressive EU posture and heavier restrictions on commercial and financial exchanges with Russia as well as travel restrictions for Russian nationals (Portela et al., 2021). On top of that, regarding the Nord stream 2 gas pipeline passing through the Baltic Sea, Poland opposed it and mobilized the CEE countries to create an informal coalition to deal with it, calling the pipeline project "the Molotov-Ribbentrop pipeline", a reminder of Germany's cooperation with the Soviet Union to occupy Poland; reducing dependence on Russia's fossil fuels is considered as the touch stone of Poland's foreign policy, trumping its geo-economic interests as a transit country (Jirušek, 2020). On the other hand, Iran has always been on the agenda as a potential energy-supplying partner to the Visegrad group—Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic—accompanying with the strengthening of the port of Świnoujście in the Baltic Sea for the transfer of liquefied gas and the gasification station, which is located on the main North-South gas transmission route in CEE through the Three Seas Initiative Corridor (Zbińkowski, 2019).

Theoretical Framework: Soft Balancing

According to Realist assumptions in international relations, states balance the dominant or hegemonic power by institutional means such as coalition building and entering into defense alliances. When confronted by a significant external threat, states may engage in checking, blocking, and undertaking certain military and diplomatic measures to prevent a change in the status quo. For such balancing acts, a state is required to consider both reliability and cost-benefits of measures such as modernization of its armed forces, armed forces capability-enhancement programs and a budgetary push for the military-industrial complex, as well as allying with other states against the imminent threat. Traditional balance of power theory is premised on the following assumptions: (1) the international system is anarchic with no central governing authority to resort to in times of prevailing threat; (2) main goal of states is survival as independent entities; (3) dynamic power competition is a fact of international politics; (4) coalition formation and building up of appropriate military wherewithal through internal or external sources against the threatening state (Shifrinson, 2020). Therefore, in the traditional so-called “hard balancing” states under threat form defensive alliances or arms buildup through internal, external, or combined sources. Under such hard balance-of- power regime, great powers try to preserve the balancing game even at the cost of smaller states, a fate Poland encountered during the great power rivalry played out in Europe in the 19th century. However, according to the soft balancing theory presented by the Indian-Canadian international relations researcher Thazha Varkey Paul, in the post-Cold War era, due to the high cost of hard power balancing, states have turned to another solution, i.e. soft power balancing, in which states restrain the power or aggressive policies of a state through international institutions, concerted diplomacy, informal ententes, and economic sanctions in view of delegitimizing the aggressive state. Instead of formal alliances, soft balancing often involve intense diplomatic efforts, informal coalitions, or ententes to balance a powerful threatening state, often than not using international institutions to apply pressure on the aggressive states (Castro, 2020). Indeed, states engaged in soft balancing develop diplomatic coalitions or ententes with one another to balance the threatening power. (Paul,

2018); as Paul puts it, soft-balancing behavior satisfies the following conditions: (1) the hegemon's power position and military behavior are of growing concern but not to the extent to pose a serious challenge to the sovereignty of second-tier powers;(2) the dominant state is a major source of irreplaceable public goods in both the economic and security areas; and (3) retaliatory action by the dominant state is far-fetched either due to covert nature of balancing efforts or non-threatening character of the challenge (Paul, 2005: 59). In the case of post-communist CEE states, Russia became one of the dominant powers in their immediate neighborhood. Nevertheless, under the theory of balance of power states in the region, in particular Poland, have been engaged in soft balancing Russia through different informal ententes such as Visegrad group. In fact, their high dependence on Russia's once-thought-irreplaceable oil and gas resources has brought them to soft balance Russia. Since the Ukraine-Russia crisis in 2014, CEE states were confronted with the harsh reality that the Russia was ready to use energy as a weapon against states challenging its power in the region; consequently, Poland as well as the rest of the region have been rushing to come up with different energy-related infrastructure initiatives in the region, Three Seas Initiative in particular, converting the region into a single energy-block.

Poland and its Position on the European Energy Map

Being a member of EU, NATO, and founding member of the Visegrad Group and several other regional initiatives, Poland has a growing clout in CEE political and economic landscape. Indeed, the leader of governing party, Law and Justice, Kaczynski claimed that by 2033 Poland will reach the EU GDP per capita average and in 2040 catch up with Germany (Harper, 2021). Poland was the only country in the EU to avoid recession during the 2008 global financial crisis, is playing an increasingly important role in the CEE by organizing different sub-regional cooperation mechanisms.

On the other hand, due to Poland's geopolitics, i.e. being located in the Northern European Plain and bounded by the Baltic Sea to the north and the Tatra and Carpathian Mountains to the south and connecting the West to the East, it has always been part of the great power competition in Europe. Considering Poland's vulnerabilities to both East and West,

the lack of natural resources, and high dependence on a single energy supplier, i.e. Russia, Poland has sought to reduce its reliance on Russia's fossil fuels and to increase its energy security through pursuing regional cooperation mechanisms such as Visegrad group and Three Seas Initiative (henceforth TSI) independent of mechanisms of an EU dominated by Germany. Such regional integration would bring about critical mass to build a military and security power and a coherent region capable of negotiating energy terms with third parties. Poland's energy-hungry industries cannot afford big disruptions in energy supply, considering the consequences of Ukraine crisis unleashed since 2014.

While Poland has been seeking to create a CEE coherent group to harmonize and diversify their energy supplies, Iran is seen as an alternative to Russia, alongside the other Middle-Eastern energy giant, Saudi Arabia. Despite heavy sanctions on Iran, another factor that puts Iran in a better position as energy supplier is its perceived influence on Russia and close ties with China. Indeed the same can be observed in the growing strategic ties between CEE countries and China, an ally of Russia, in regional cooperation mechanisms such as China-CEE summit (17+1 summits), despite the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine since 2014 and criticism from the EU, Western Europe, and the USA in particular (Sabbaghian and Singh, 2021). While Poland shies away from openly declaring Germany an enemy, it perceives with great mistrust German policies in CEE. Therefore, soft balancing both Germany and Russia would require both strong regional and international cooperation mechanisms, involving actors capable of influencing Russia and Germany; this has led to the appearance of a plethora of regional initiatives, including TSI with direct involvement of other powers such as China and possibly Iran. The objective of the TSI is, therefore, to strengthen trade, infrastructure, energy, and political co-operation in the area between the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black seas, and to integrate the countries on the North-South axis by connecting infrastructure across the energy, transport and telecommunications sectors (Górka, 2018). The countries involved share the same objectives: economic growth, energy security, and a stronger and more cohesive CEE, capable of taking decision as a regional body.

Poland and Iran: The Onset of Relations

Despite the reports on the alleged delivery of Iranian drones to Russia to use in the Ukraine war, Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Pawel Jablonski's trip to Iran was a clear sign of an important historical and strategic connection between the two states (Ministrstwo, 2022). Historical ties between Iran and Poland have undergone multiple challenges due to drastic changes in both countries, the latest being the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1978 and the fall of communism in Poland in 1989. The beginning of the relations between Poland and Iran dates back to the 16th century in view of a possible cooperation against the Ottoman Empire. In the years immediately after the First World War, Iran was one of the few countries that recognized Poland in 1927 and the treaty of friendship was signed between the two (Osiewicz, 2022); While Iran never recognized the partition of Poland, it was a host to tens of thousands of Polish refugees from the Soviet Union during World War II which deepened the political-historical ties between the two nations (Kasprzak and Sterninski, 2017). During the Cold War, Poland, as one of the USSR satellite states, was cautious in its relations with Iran as the latter was a close ally of the US in the Persian Gulf; being in opposing camps during the Cold War, there were clear limits to the quality of relations at the political level between the parties. However, Poland, as a middle power, was taking steps towards relative independence from the Soviet Union in its relations with Iran, and reaping gains from American loans and cheap Soviet energy supplies by playing the two great powers off against one another (Maj, 2019).

Poland and Iran Relations after the Islamic Revolution of 1979

In the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Poland began openly criticizing the former regime as the Polish foreign ministry praised "Iranian patriotism and freedom from imperialistic domination" (Maj, 2019: 9). In fact, in its soft balancing, Poland sought to have a relationship with both superpowers of its time and play the role of a mediator between East and West in various issues (Grigorescu, 2008). Therefore, during the US-Iran hostage crisis, it refused to condemn Iran as strongly as the US requested and sought to play the mediator between the two sides. Likewise during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Poland adopted the enduring neutrality, showing independence in its stance (Stadler, 2022). Poland, therefore, managed to receive record

2 billion dollars in loans from the US between 1979 and 1981 (Bartel, 2017). Poland, enjoying both financial assistance and consumption subsidy from the USSR and American loans for economic reforms, found itself in a difficult situation after the introduction of martial law in 1981, being subject to severe sanctions by the West and distrusted by the USSR (Maj, 2021). As a result, Poland sought to develop stronger ties with resource-rich Iran. During the Iran-Iraq war, Poland led the Warsaw Pact countries to adopt a neutral policy, while some Warsaw Pact countries such as Romania were particularly hard hit by the Iran-Iraq war (Braun, 2019). After the fall of communism in Poland and the establishment of democracy, joining the NATO and EU were considered main foreign policy goals, which were achieved in 1999 and 2004, respectively (Cwiek, 2020); With the onset of economic slowdown due to fiscal and monetary constraints of a host of EU conditionality measures, such as the Copenhagen criteria, Poland's need for energy resources post-EU membership sharply declined (Brodny and Tutak, 2021). However, after the shock therapy of the 90s, the economic growth was back on full throttle on the threshold of the third millennium, thereby increasingly heavy reliance on Russia for energy supplies, like the rest of CEE countries. However, with growing Russian interventionism in Georgia, Moldova, and finally Ukraine, and the subsequent frozen conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Artsakh, and Donbas region, pursuing independence from Russian fossil fuels, therefore, became the corner stone of Polish foreign policy. With an eye on Russia, Poland defines its relation with Iran under the energy security policy. Indeed, despite rounds of US sanctions over the Iran nuclear program, Poland has shown willingness to cooperate with Iran for an eventual North-South energy corridor under the TSI. Although Poland did not officially participate in the nuclear negotiations with Iran, known as 5+1, it was directly touched by the nuclear agreement outcomes and eventual energy deal with Iran (Osiewidz, 2021). During the presidency of Hassan Rouhani in the aftermath of the signing of the JCPOA in 2015, obstacles to future energy cooperation between Poland and Iran were removed and relations between the two flourished. Not only did Iran welcome the Polish move for a closer cooperation, Iran's long-standing foreign policy has always been for

greater cooperation with European countries based on mutual respect and respect for sovereignty.

Regarding energy deals, the Polish state-owned oil and gas giant PGNiG signed a memorandum of understanding for the development of the Lavan oil field with Iran's National Oil Company in 2007, which amounted to 9 billion dollars, though it never came to fruition as a result of long delays in implementation and the subsequent exclusion from the Project in 2011 (Reuters, 2011). However, Polish energy companies flock to Iran once again with the JCPOA in sight in 2015. Polish state-owned PGNiG was among 29 foreign companies certified to bid for oil and gas projects in Iran and another Polish company, Grupa Azoty, had also plans for modernization of Iran's petrochemical sector, while Iran was featured among the five most prospective markets for Polish companies by the Poland's government post-JCPOA (Bieliszczuk, 2017). However, Poland's plans for turning the energy-deprived CEE to an energy hub have not solely been hinged on Iran, but its arch-rival Saudi Arabia is also part of the plan. Indeed, after Trump's withdrawal from Iran's nuclear deal on May 8, 2018, Poland has turned to Saudi Arabia for its energy infrastructure plans. The announced investments of the Saudi oil company Aramco in Poland's PKN Orlen Company to make Poland the energy epicenter in CEE reflects Poland's strategic view of West Asia for its energy security initiatives (Aramco, 2022). On top of that, PKN Orlen's purchase of another Polish energy company, Lotos, is seen as part of a wider plan by Poland to create 'national champions' able to compete with global players and attract more investments for energy infrastructure planning in the CEE with Poland at its epicenter and to lead the region in petrochemicals and gas-fired energy.

Poland, Russia and Iran Nuclear Issue

Poland's confrontation with Western European countries, especially Germany, was intensified in the country's response to the mechanism proposed by the EU following the then US president Donald Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA. Following this unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA, on September 24, 2018, in order to preserve the JCPOA, the European Commission unveiled a special purpose vehicle (SPV) to facilitate payments related to Iran's exports (including oil) and imports,

known as INSTEX, which would handle transactions between companies and their Iranian trade partners without being transparent to US authorities, and thus not be subject to sanctions (Binder, 2018). However, Poland opposed the SPV and ultimately did not join INSTEX. The reason Poland opposed to such mechanism was the constant fear of close economic ties between Germany and Russia at the time and possible use of the SPV for circumventing sanctions against Russia. Closely related to that was the formation of Normandy Format, an initiative by France and Germany to negotiate a peace agreement for the Donbas region and establish a link between the negotiations and EU-wide action over the Ukraine crisis which included France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine, and notably excluded Poland. However, post presidential election and right-wing victory in Poland in late 2015, Polish officials began to criticize the Normandy format, to the extent that Poland's Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski claimed that Germany and Russia created a concert of powers over the head of Poland (Alcaro and Siddi, 2020: 13). Such mistrust toward Germany goes back to the concept of Mittel-Europa developed in the early 20th century by German geographers and later on adopted by politicians. For many German geographers, Central Europe (Mittel-Europa) was an area that "naturally" should belong to "Greater Germany", constituting its agricultural and food supply routes and was part of the German "living space" (lebensraum), in which there were no grounds for the formation of small states such as Poland (Potulski, 2017). Therefore, Poland views Germany as a hegemonic power with ambitions of dominating the whole CEE as its backyard; such mistrust of the German and to some extent the EU project in its current form has led Poland to develop strong transatlantic relations with the US, both within the framework of NATO as well as in a bilateral arrangement. Consequently, although Poland seeks to play mediator between Iran, a strategic partner in energy domain, and the US, its security partner, nevertheless it balances Iran against the US security concerns such as Iranian developing missile capabilities as it is stated by Polish foreign minister during his visit to the US (Strzalkowski, 2018).

Three Seas Initiative and Iran: Indo-Atlantic Corridor

Today we are witnessing different sub-regional cooperation mechanisms in CEE such as the Black Sea Synergy Initiative, the Black Sea Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation, the Security Cooperation Initiative with NATO in The Black Sea and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, and Three Seas Initiative (Dungaciu and Dumitrescu, 2019). The latter as a Poland-led initiative in the region is to strengthen trade, infrastructure, energy, and political co-operation in the area between the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black seas. This region accounts for 28% of EU territory and 22% of its population, and 10% of the EU's gross domestic product and is the pet project of Poland for deepening ties between the countries of the so-called "Three Seas¹", connecting to the earlier idea of intermarium². In Polish political discourse Intermarium is a concept with broad geographical and historical and political connotations. The main "geopolitical" idea of the Intermarium concept is the creation of CEE, understood as the lands lying in between Germany and Russia, as a political entity that could resist the expansion of its two neighbors and set conditions for the development of the region. The idea was finally proposed at the political level by the famous Polish politician Józef Piłsudski to create an independent Poland in the heart of Europe between 1918 and 1921; Though the idea was first encompassed a real political integration and unity, later on it was watered down to a mere political entente due to the presence of different ethnicities and their opposition to such political union (Potulski, 2017). The intermarium idea was further expanded to connect the CEE through the Black Sea with Caucasus and Iran by the Ukrainian politician Yuri Lipa in the early 20th century, in which the creation of the "Black Sea Fortress" with the cooperation of the Caucasus countries and the "Iranian platform" would guarantee a new Indo-Atlantic maritime trade route for many land-locked CEE by connecting the Baltic Sea, in the Atlantic Ocean, to the Indian Ocean through Iran (Polegkyi, 2021: 32). The Three Seas Initiative was established in 2015 by the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda and the President of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic, with the aim of strengthening and deepening

1. Trójmorza

2. międzymorze

the relations and cooperation between the EU member states in the east of the continent, which are surrounded by the Adriatic, Black and Baltic seas which presents an informal platform for securing political support and decisive action on specific cross-border and macro-regional projects of strategic importance to the States involved in the form of a flexible presidential forum in order to reach energy and security-related decisions at the top level. At the initiative's first summit in Dubrovnik, Croatia, in 2016, the group of 12 states (CEE plus Austria) signed a statement pledging to cooperate on issues related to energy, transportation and economic sectors in this sub-region, with an emphasis on improving the functional cooperation among the involved nation-states (Grgić, 2021). This sub-region, which is to connect the northern ports, especially in Poland and the Baltic countries, with the landlocked countries in Central and Eastern Europe, is aimed at independence from Russia's fossil fuels and energy security in the CEE. In fact, The TSI marks a shift in the dynamics of European sub-regionalism as it is born out of CEE impulses that have sought to challenge the Union's institutions and norms dominated by Germany and Western Europe. Therefore, the absence of the EU in this mechanism illustrates the Polish view, which actually defined this project, unlike most EU projects, based on North-South cooperation, and not East-West (Zbinkowski, 2019). Such regional integration would bring about critical mass to build a strong security power and a coherent region capable of negotiating energy terms with third parties. Indeed, Poland aspires to make CEE a coherent region capable of withstanding the pressure emanating from both an EU dominated by Germany, and Russia; Lack of transport links and connecting infrastructures between CEE countries makes them vulnerable and highly exposed to threats from the West and the East, and the Polish solution is to have a locally-generated and managed regionalism in CEE, aimed at bringing about regional cooperation and integration. Therefore, while the geo-economic aspect of the TSI involves the energy resources of the Persian Gulf, the geopolitical aspect of the TSI is an Indo-Atlantic corridor or the North-South Corridor (independent of Russia and the EU) connecting the Baltic Sea in the north to the Indian Ocean through Caucasus (Georgia and Armenia), and Iran. Indeed, Visegrad countries that are members of the TSI as well vocally

supported the nuclear deal with Iran which could eventually facilitate their diversification strategies and substantially reduce dependence on Russia. After signing the Iran Nuclear Deal, there were intense negotiations for different energy routes between Iran and CEE and Poland began purchasing Iranian oil and crude oil with the arrival set at the port of Gdansk in the Baltic Sea in 2018 (Dyduch and Skorek, 2020: 5). Indeed, Iran due to its geography and close ties with Russia and China can be the epicenter of the TSI, enabling the two wings of TSI, namely, geopolitical and geo-economic. In fact, Poland and the CEE under the TSI as a regional block have already been balancing against both German hegemony in the EU and Russian interventionism in the Eastern Europe through cooperation in energy and infrastructure sectors with China. The China-CEEC summit is an example of the policy of hedging against Russia and Germany by facilitating Chinese investments and infrastructure projects (Gruebler, 2021). Poland, being among the first 7 countries in the production of petrochemical products as well as the fourth oil consumer among the 27 EU members in 2020, seeks to play a significant role in energy market in CEE and the wider EU with the vision to become energy hub connecting the Balkans to the Baltic Sea, and the CEE to the Western Europe.

In fact, despite the EU's opposition to closer ties between the CEE and China, Poland has strengthened its relations with China, and is seeking stronger partnership with emerging economies such as India outside EU framework; While both Poland and Iran are enthusiastic about energy cooperation under the TSI, the reality is that US sanctions and the breakdown of nuclear talks have affected the future plans. There are two possible outcomes for the TSI depending on Iran's participation in it: (1) In case nuclear talks for the revival of JCPOA succeed, there will be ample opportunities for Iran and TSI partners to develop strategic Indo-Atlantic corridor; Iran's influence on Russia and possible triad cooperation between China, CEE, and Iran in energy infrastructure would further enhance the geo-strategic entente between the CEE and Iran; furthermore, Iran as a resource-rich state would be a reliable energy supplier for CEE countries, providing much-needed oil and gas resources (2) In case Nuclear Talks fail, the geopolitical wing of TSI project will be affected since Iran would be indispensable for a North-South corridor and eventual Indo-Atlantic maritime route. However,

other Persian Gulf states, Saudi Arabia in particular, will set to gain enormous political and economic clout in CEE by replacing Iran as the energy partner. Iran still would be able to participate in the geo-political angle of TSI due to its influence on Russia and close ties with China. However, it would lose its geo-economic edge to Saudi Arabia.

Conclusions

Considering that Poland as an economic and political heavy-weight in the CEE aspires to make the CEE a region independent from Russia's energy resources and energy secure, the main question of this research was about the kind of role Iran plays in the energy security of Poland and the rest of CEE. The hypothesis of this research stated that Iran is positioned as a major potential energy supplier within the Poland-led Three Seas Initiative in Central and Eastern Europe in view of efforts to build an energy-resilient region. This paper's main intervention has been in highlighting the role Iran could play in Poland-led Three Seas Initiative, which carries high ambitions to build an energy-resilient region in CEE. The results of this research indicate despite the significant decrease in the level of trade after the re-imposition of US sanctions in 2018, the political and strategic ties between Poland and Iran have withstood the test of time. It is shown that Iran was not new to the discussions touching upon a coherent self-reliant CEE and that Iran, rich in natural resources, lies at the heart of TSI project. Poland on the genesis of TSI put much emphasis on its independent character from Brussels' politics and has sought to revive the Intermarium project. This paper's results indicate that Iran's influence on and close ties with Russia and possible triad cooperation between China, CEE, and Iran in energy infrastructure would further enhance the geo-strategic entente between the CEE and Iran under the TSI. However, the geo-economic dimension of TSI can still rely on other Persian Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia, for the energy supply. Another geostrategic goal of the TSI is to open a new maritime route, an Indo-Atlantic one, connecting the Baltic Sea and land-locked CEE countries through Iran to the Indian Ocean. Therefore, despite the US sanction on Iran, Iran's geostrategic position will make it indispensable for the geostrategic wing of the TSI.

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