



## **THE NORTH: A NEW ACADEMIC FRONTIER**

**An Opening Address  
by  
the President of Iceland  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
at an International Conference on  
Polar Law and Climate Change  
University of Akureyri  
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*The speech was delivered without notes.  
This is a transcript of the recording.*

Rector, Scientists, Professors,  
Ambassadors,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great pleasure for me to be once again in Akureyri to talk about the Arctic and the North, the challenges which we face in the coming years and how they offer the scholarly community many interesting issues and projects for dialogue and research.

I was recalling on the way here today that ten years ago or so, when we started a dialogue on the North at the University of Rovaniemi, the general response we got from most people was a polite passiveness, diplomatic attempts to change the subject to something else, implying that this might be of some interest but not really of any great relevance.

Almost every meeting we attended had to start with a major argument on why we should be talking about the North and the Arctic, why this neglected area, this isolated territory, should now become the subject of intellectual activity, academic, political and policy-oriented cooperation. It is highly significant that, when we gather here today, the scene has fundamentally been transformed. Now there are so many players in the field of Arctic and Northern issues that it is in danger of becoming overcrowded.

The Government of Canada, which for a long time had little interest in Northern issues, decided a year ago in the Throne Speech to devote the opening section to Northern issues and the role of Canada in the future of the Arctic. The European Union is now in the process of formulating a major policy documentation in this area. A few years ago, an agreement was signed between Russia, the European Union, Iceland and Norway on Northern cooperation. Even the President of France, known to be active in many areas, has recently decided to appoint Michael Rochard, the distinguished former Prime Minister of France, to be his special representative on Arctic and Nordic issues. The new Administration in Washington is working on reformulating the approach to Arctic and Northern cooperation. In Congress we now have a number of Senators and Members of the House who take an active interest in this area.

In addition, concern over climate change and the fact that climate change is happening three times faster in the Arctic and the Northern areas has, of course, contributed significantly to this transformation. Even in countries as far away as Bangladesh, there is now a keen interest in following what is happening in the North. The people of Bangladesh have concluded that the greatest security threat that faces their country in coming years is not from the armies of India or Pakistan, but from the melting of the ice in the Arctic and the North. Even in the Himalayan region, leaders are gradually beginning to look at how the countries and the nations in the Arctic have formulated their cooperation.

All of this has transformed the field of Arctic and Northern issues in a fundamental way. We have become acutely aware that there is perhaps no other area on the globe where there is such a lack of fundamental legal frameworks. The landmass around the globe is dominated by national laws or regional treaties, and the Law of the Sea has to a large extent defined the principles of cooperation and legal decisions with respect to the oceans.

But because, due to Cold War tensions, the Arctic and the North was primarily an unknown territory, a taboo territory, very little effort has been made over previous decades to lay the necessary legal groundwork. There are many intellectual areas which in the coming years can bring significant contributions to the North and the Arctic.

I would even go so far as to say that with respect to the earth as a whole, the Arctic and the North is the new intellectual frontier. A new frontier in the sense that it requires scientific and research discoveries and active scholarly participation in the same way as, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, exploration on frontiers in different parts of the world, such as

the United States and the continent of Africa, produced discoveries and stimulated curiosity and research.

This new frontier must be a focus not only of knowledge, research and intellectual cooperation, but above all of a new type of policy formulation, a new type of policy discussion between representatives of the countries that are formally a part of the Arctic and the North and also representatives of the entire global community. It is important for us to recognise that although we have eight formal partners on the Arctic Council, what happens in this part of the world is of great consequence for every country, every part of the globe. We can not conduct the future of the North and the Arctic in political isolation. We have to make the dialogue on the future of the North and the Arctic a global concern.

To some extent, we can use the analogy of how, during the Cold War, there were think-tanks, conferences, academic and scientific dialogues in many different parts of the world, not only in the United States, the Soviet Union and Western Europe but also in the non-aligned countries, in Asia and Africa, to deal with the threat of nuclear confrontation, the arms build-up between the superpowers.

The work done in universities and other academic and research forums in the 60s and the 70s, and into the 80s, laid to some extent the foundation for the successful transformation from the Cold War over to our present times. I believe it would not have been possible to conduct that transformation so quickly and so successfully if, in the previous twenty years or so, there hadn't been such enormous activity within the academic and research communities.

We could perhaps, to clarify the picture a little bit, mention three types of challenges which we must focus on, at different levels of cooperation.

First, the challenges for international organisations like the Arctic Council, which in the beginning was intended to be a minor forum for limited discussion. I have sometimes mentioned to Bill Clinton that even within his enlightened Administration with Al Gore on board there was no willingness to have a permanent secretariat or a formal policy-making framework within the Arctic Council; so afraid were they of giving some power to this new board. Now, however, the Arctic Council has established itself very well, but the fundamental question remains: How is it going to develop? Will it remain limited to its original purpose, or will the member countries or associated members of the Arctic Council, have the courage and the political willingness to expand the function of the Arctic Council to many of the relevant issues that have hitherto been deemed to be outside its line of interest?

The European Union has now taken an active interest in the Arctic and the North for a number of reasons; because of the energy resources in the North and the Arctic, because of the new sea routes, because of the speed of climate change, and other reasons. It is very interesting that when I and other representatives of this republic have discussions with various representatives of the European Union countries, the first or the second reason they mention when asked why the European Union should be interested in having Iceland as a member, involves Northern and Arctic issues. It has, however, not been resolved in what form the participation of the European Union will take.

We also see within NATO that military cooperation in the North Atlantic has changed and questions remain to be answered in coming years. Also, the United Nations will sooner or later have to broaden its concerns to the Arctic if that body wants to be globally relevant in the coming decades. Here I am not just referring to climate change, but also human rights, human development and many other issues.

The second level of challenge consists of regional challenges at provincial levels within the federal states of Russia, the United States and Canada. These relate directly to the rights and positions of the indigenous people all over the North and the Arctic who have been there for thousands of years, since long before the states which now claim to be the governing forces were created.

I mentioned here last year that it was for me a moving experience to participate in a discussion with the leaders of the indigenous Indians in the North-West territories of Canada, who spoke neither English nor French. For decades, they had waited until they could get someone from their tribes to study law and graduate from a university in Canada and then come back to the tribes so they could then legally justify their historic claims and rights to the federal government of Canada.

All of us, from the so-called enlightened western world, the Nordic countries, Canada and the United States, have a poor awareness of the basic human rights of these people, that there is a lot that remains to be resolved, issues that concern the borders between the nation states and the indigenous people.

The third challenge I would like to mention is for the Nordic countries. I have for a number of years been of the opinion that if we look towards the global relevance of the Nordic countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a primary pillar in that relevance is the future, the issues and the concerns of the Arctic and the North. There is no area where I can see the Nordic countries having directly to play such a constructive role, simply because the five Nordic countries form a formidable flock within the Arctic area.

Because the so-called Nordic model, in terms of the welfare state, human rights and economic success, is internationally recognized, the answer which the Nordic countries will give on the future of the North is of primary importance.

There we come to Greenland, the great landmass in the North. It was, to cite another personal experience, a strong and moving reminder of the future to be present this summer at the historic occasion in Nuuk when the people of Greenland received from Her Majesty's hand the law giving Greenland the right to self-governance, to enhance its status within the Kingdom of Denmark to a level which Iceland reached in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There I had discussions with the new generation of leaders in Greenland who seemed to be convinced that sooner or later Greenland will achieve an independent status, maybe still inside the Danish Kingdom, but not necessarily within the Danish State.

As we all know, the landmass of Greenland is seven times the size of Germany. An important factor in cooperation in this part of the world will be how the people who live and rule in this huge landmass act and behave with respect to others. Just imagine if, on the continent of Europe, suddenly those who lived in France, Germany, Poland, Italy and Spain, to name countries that together equal the size of Greenland, suddenly gained the possibility to govern themselves.

So the Nordic family of nations, including Greenland, will have to face in a new way the concrete question: What kind of role do we want to play?

There are people all over the world who are closely watching how we handle this: the debate on laws and human rights, economic developments and climate change and the melting of the ice that is taking place in the North.

Since I spoke here last year, I have become even more aware of the acute situation in the Himalayan region; how it resembles the situation in the Arctic. Just as the Arctic was dominated throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Soviet Union on the one hand and the United States and Canada on the other, with a number of small countries in between, China and India and a number of small countries are the main players in the Himalayan region. There are about 15,000 glaciers in the Himalayas; they are, however, thinner than in Iceland or in Greenland. The present prediction is that given the rate which already characterises climate change, these glaciers, most of them, if not all of them, will disappear completely within the next thirty or forty years.

The Himalayas are the great water reservoir of China and India. Most of the big rivers of these countries and Bangladesh originate in the Himalayas. There are over a billion people who depend acutely for their livelihood, food and economic well-being on the Himalayas.

We here in the North decided at the end of the Cold War to form the Arctic Council as an organ for cooperation. Gradually we started to talk to each other, and in the last ten years or so we have gained valuable experience. Like the Arctic, the Himalayas embrace many indigenous peoples, peoples of different races and religions, indigenous peoples who are different from the nations that dominate China and India.

Therefore, I think it would be an interesting and very valuable exercise, not only to have a discussion like the one we are having here today and will be having in the coming days and at other such conferences and meetings, but also to bring together a joint forum on the Arctic and the Himalayas, inviting people not only from Russia and the United States, Canada and the Nordic countries, but also from China and India and the other Himalayan nations to come together and talk about these issues. Most of the challenges that relate to the North and the Arctic are of direct relevance to the future of the Himalayas.

So I will take the opportunity here today to put forward this proposal, or an idea or whatever you want to call it: that together, we consider - the universities, the policymakers and others - that we look for opportunities within the next year or so to approach China and India and the other countries in the Himalayas and create a joint forum on the Arctic and the Himalayas.

Quite frankly, even if climate change threatens the livelihood, the human rights, the economic rights and the every-day life of people in the North, the disaster caused by the melting of the ice in the Himalayas will be on a much greater scale than anything that is going to happen in the North. With respect to human rights and the rule of law, some of the problems that we have to deal with in the Arctic are even more acute, critical and sensitive when it comes to the Himalayas.

All of this brings me to the conclusion that what started ten years ago as a side-line discussion on the future of the North and the Arctic, as an interest of a few scholars and a few policy-makers in our countries, has now been moved into the very centre of global concerns. It has moved upstage in such a way that how we conduct our discussion and our dialogue will be of great consequence not just for us but for people all over the world. But, just like in the advance to the end of the Cold War, academic discussions, research and scientific dialogue are an absolute prerequisite for success in this area. It is of utmost importance to bear in

mind throughout all stages in this dialogue that it is not just an academic exercise. It is of a vital relevance to the future of the world, which seems to be on a dangerous path towards irreversible climate change that will dramatically change the livelihood of people everywhere and will be much more difficult to deal with than the Cold War.

Reagan and Gorbachev could meet in Reykjavík more than twenty years ago and lay the groundwork for the end of the Cold War. Unfortunately I think now the issues are so complicated that no two leaders, with due respect to the present global leaders, could come together and formulate the solution. To be successful, we need the involvement of leaders from all over the world.

In this sense, the academic dialogue and the scientific cooperation which you are engaged in is of the utmost importance and I congratulate the University of Akureyri once again for having brought you all together. I want to tell you how grateful I am that you have made the visit to Iceland and helped us in this way to continue our effort to make Akureyri and this country a place where we can discuss the future of the North from different academic perspectives.