



**A Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the
Polar Law Symposium
Nuuk
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*The speech was delivered without notes
This is a transcript of the recording*

It is indeed a great pleasure to be here in Nuuk and be with you at this conference. This is the first time I participate in a conference in Greenland; it may even be the first time that a Head of State of another country has come to Greenland specifically and solely to participate in an international conference. It is an indication of how both the world and Greenland have changed in a positive way.

But also, to be very frank, I have come here primarily to listen to what you have to say. I know there are many people who believe that those who hold positions similar to mine actually never listen to anybody; we just go around making statements and speeches and never sit down and show any interest in what other people are saying.

It might surprise you that a quite a number of my colleagues are pretty good listeners.

There is also an additional reason why I wanted to come here to listen, to take two days out of my programme for that purpose. The reason is that your dialogue is really at the cutting edge of academic and scientific developments on Arctic issues. If we are going to have successful policy-making in the Arctic and the North, an area that has now become one of the most important regions of the world, it must be based on active scientific and scholarly conclusions. Otherwise we are going to make enormous mistakes.

I have said, and I will say it again here today, that perhaps no other area is as dependent on active research and scholarly dialogue in the 21st century – not just in ten years' time or twenty years time, but in the immediate future – as the Arctic and the North.

I have also come to support active cooperation between Iceland and Greenland, to demonstrate that we have become so close that our dialogue has become normal and intense. The University of Akureyri and the University in Nuuk can be leading pillars in this new construction of cooperation and scholarly discovery.

It was mentioned here before how small the University of Akureyri was when it began. I could also tell you that when the University of Iceland was founded in 1911 it only had forty students; only one of them was a woman. There was no building to house the University. For the following 20-25 years it had to be in the Parliament building. This had some influence on the MPs in a positive way!

It reflects the state of the nation that although the vision was to establish a university, there was no building to house it. In one hundred years, the University has developed into a formidable institution, with multi-disciplinary departments and active engagements with the global scientific community in creating new knowledge.

So my primary purpose in being here is to listen, to support Greenland in establishing Nuuk and other places as venues for international scholarly discussion, and also to strengthen cooperation between Iceland and Greenland and especially between Akureyri and Nuuk.

Then again, if people in my position are invited to stand up and speak, we can't resist the temptation to continue a little bit. So I am going to do that this morning.

Let me first emphasize, as I have been saying now for about two or three years, that I see the North and the Arctic as a new intellectual frontier. In the sense that there is an urgent need for scientific discoveries and scholarly dialogue. Perhaps similar to what happened two or three hundred years ago with respect to other parts of the world. The difference is, however, that with this new frontier we only have a few years, at the most five or ten, to get our act together, if the policy-making and the decision making processes, not only among the Arctic countries but also throughout the globe, are going to be successful.

This new intellectual frontier must also be related to scholarly activity in other parts of the world. This was demonstrated in an inspiring

way in Iceland last week when scientists and scholars who have primarily concerned themselves with the Himalayan regions came to Iceland and met up with the Open Assembly of the Northern Research Forum. It was the first time in history that scholars and scientists who have worked on the Himalayan region, from India, China, Pakistan, Nepal, Europe and the United States, came together with scientists and scholars from the northern countries, from the Arctic, from Russia, the Nordic countries, Canada and Alaska to discuss “Our Ice Dependent World”.

Now, the political establishments all over the world recognise that we all live in a single ice dependent world. We need to deal with that challenge on the basis of law, and of rights for people who live in the ice world; also to define what will be the role of the countries that have boundaries in those areas and the role of the rest of the world. These are not easy issues.

Let me therefore this morning list seven areas where I believe we need active scholarly cooperation between all of you and scholars in other parts of the Arctic and the rest of the world.

The first regards the position and the rights of the indigenous people, their decision-making and involvement in determining not only their future but the future of the Arctic. Fortunately, in the last ten or fifteen years, Arctic cooperation has included organisations of indigenous peoples more than has been the case in other parts of the world.

We should not rest on those laurels and thereby think that we have done enough, that we have established a sufficient democratic involvement of the indigenous people in the decision-making processes.

This was demonstrated very clearly a few months ago in Alaska, where a visionary and entrepreneurial woman who loves Alaska called together a conference which was attended not just by corporate players from oil companies, shipping companies and policy-makers from Washington and the Government of Alaska, but also by an impressive gathering of community leaders from small whaling communities, villages of two or three hundred people. Throughout the entire conference those indigenous leaders always came into the discussion with their point of view.

It was a startling demonstration that although we have succeeded in the Arctic and the North, through the Arctic Council and other bodies, in recognizing the rights of indigenous people, the process is far from over.

We in the Nordic countries also have to recognize – we tend to present ourselves as enlightened leaders in terms of human rights – that

something needs to be done on our home territories as well. Why is this? To name only one reason: climate change. The negative impact of climate change will hit the indigenous people first. I said “will”; we could say it IS already hitting the indigenous people. They will be the first that will be or are being sacrificed; in terms of their way of life, their culture, their economies and their future – due to industrial activities in Europe and in the United States and a few Asian countries.

We are pretty good at dealing with refugees and those who suffer in wars. But the indigenous people in Alaska and here in Greenland, and the northern part of Russia, and also in the northern part of the Nordic countries, are already suffering from economic actions of nations far away.

In addition, as you know very well here in Greenland, the international corporate world and many powerful economic players now want to get access to the resources in the areas occupied by the communities of the Arctic people.

These are pretty powerful players. They have now arrived in the front garden of the indigenous people; in Alaska, in Greenland, in the northern part of the Nordic countries and even in Russia.

We have a double challenge or triple challenge facing the indigenous people. First, how do we expand and strengthen their decision-making role within Arctic institutions? Second, how do we give them a voice and a position with respect to how they are already suffering due to climate change? Third, what will be their role, their local community’s role, in deciding how far the rest of the world will be invited into their front garden?

The international system is organized in such a way that these decisions are taken by national governments. Washington will ultimately determine what happens in Alaska. Moscow will ultimately determine what happens in the faraway parts of Russia, but Copenhagen will no longer determine alone what happens here in Greenland.

The position, the power and the involvement of the indigenous people is the first area that I wanted to mention here today.

The second area is how do we expand, develop and examine the new forms of cooperation that have, fortunately and positively, and to some extent inspiringly, been created in the Arctic region? Here for the first time in history it is accepted that sub-national entities like, for example, the state of Alaska, or different regions in Russia, or even Greenland, can cooperate, not only with nation states like Iceland, Sweden and others

within the Arctic, but also with states and countries in other parts of the world.

The two conferences that took place in Iceland last week were an interesting demonstration of how this is possible; how scientists and experts from Alaska joined in an active cooperation and dialogue with people from China and India.

This is very positive, but we have to strengthen these processes. We have to recognize them. We have to analyse the opportunities as well as the challenges, because traditional political science doesn't deal with them.

This is a new playing field of local entities, whether we call them local councils or local authorities or states, as Alaska is called, or regions as they are called in Russia; whatever they are called, they are below the nation-state level. How their involvement in the Arctic decision-making process will develop is already on the table and needs to be studied and analysed in an effective way.

The third area is the existence of concrete developments and challenges, which are or will be with us whether we like it or not. Let me first mention the exploration of energy resources in the Arctic and the North. We all know that this is already taking place; the exploration of even more is on the agenda; the players have arrived in Alaska, in Greenland, in Russia; even in Iceland they will arrive in the new Dragon Area, making my country rise to the challenge of being a player in the oil industry. That is something new for us.

This carries enormous opportunities, but also enormous risks for the environment, and it requires regulations. This is a sensitive environment where, if something bad happens, it could pose an enormous threat to other countries, even to the entire world.

The second concrete task is the arrival in our waters, up here in the Arctic, of cruise ships. I don't know if you saw the one that was here in Nuuk yesterday. If you didn't you missed a lot because this huge cruise ship was a striking example of these new arrivals. They are not just calling here; they are calling in Alaska, they are cruising close to the coast of Russia, they are calling in Iceland and in Norway.

Nobody has really started to look into how we are going to regulate this cruise ship traffic. According to international law, they are perfectly free to go anywhere they want. But if there is a major cruise ship disaster here in the North we will be alerted to what we did not do, what we did not prepare for.

The third such element is the opening up of the new sea routes. Russia will, I was told two weeks ago, pass a new law later this year which will be the Russian legal framework for the Northern Sea Route. This is very interesting. Russia is already taking the leadership in formulating the legal framework in order to allow ships to go along the Russian coastline, along the sea route from Asia into the North Atlantic. I do not know what will be in this law but I think we should be grateful to the Russians for having alerted all of us to the fact that we need an elaborate and extensive legal framework to regulate this monumental change, not only for our part of the world but also for the entire global trade system.

It seems absolutely clear that the Russians are preparing themselves for this opening in the next five years. Also, the Chinese Polar Institute plans to send an icebreaker next spring from China across the North Pole to Iceland to demonstrate that this can be done.

Then the fisheries. With the melting of the ice, new fishing grounds will open up, and the fish stocks will migrate – they are already doing so. That is why we have a mackerel dispute between Iceland, the Faroe Islands, the European Union and Norway. The fishing fleet which roams around international waters will be able to go beyond the 200 mile zone in North and into the Arctic where they couldn't go before.

It needed Michel Rocard, former Prime Minister of France and President Sarkozy's special representative on the Arctic, to alert us in Iceland to this. We usually think that we are in the forefront on everything that has to do with fish! But it needed a former French Prime Minister to wake us up to the fact that we need to start to think about how to regulate the fish stocks in the Arctic once the ice melts in a decisive way.

All of these are concrete challenges that are either already with us or will be with us in the near future. They all need legal frameworks, regulations, safe-guards, international cooperation. If the academic community doesn't involve itself effectively in these issues, not in five or ten years, but here and now, those in decision-making positions will make a lot of mistakes.

Here I come to the fourth element of the areas I referred to at the outset, the fundamental question: What is going to be the rightful involvement of outsiders in this game? We already have the European Union knocking on the door asking for a seat at the table. We have the Chinese arriving and saying: Hey! We also want a seat at the table.

This summer in Iceland I met a number of delegations from China, from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, from the China Polar Institute and from various other Chinese bodies. They mentioned that when China becomes the main trading country in the world, using these new sea routes, it will not make sense if the main trading country doesn't have a seat at the table.

In addition, they argued convincingly that they are already a major scientific player in this part of the world. The Chinese Polar Institute has already had twenty-seven expeditions to Antarctica. They have already had four expeditions to the Arctic. They are building new icebreakers. They are giving enormous amounts of money to training scientists and are seeking international cooperation in this area.

Frankly, I understand them well. As I said before, we in the Arctic and the North have to recognize that our future is also a global responsibility. This is not just a regional issue which we can just deliberate on among ourselves. What we do here in the Arctic will have enormous consequences for the rest of the world. We have to find ways, legal ways, frameworks and institutional methods, to have a constructive dialogue with the rest of the world.

Regrettably, the United Nations is somewhat absent in this part of the world. This is something the United Nations should look at, both as a central organisation and also through the various sister organisations. Maybe this is too strong a statement. But if you look at their engagements in Africa, in Asia, in the Middle East and many other parts of the world – and I have been involved in this business of Northern and Arctic cooperation for thirteen years – I have not seen the United Nations in any of these encounters and discussions.

UNESCO, yes, a few months ago woke up to the fact that they want to be a part of the Third Pole Environment cooperation. But I have not seen a similar interest in the Arctic cooperation. So we also have to answer the question: Are we going to rely on an already established institutional framework like the UN or are we going to create our own framework for embracing the rest of the world in Arctic cooperation?

These are open questions. We have not yet provided the answers.

The fifth element of the seven is of course, as was discussed to some extent in Iceland a few days ago: what is the role of existing international treaties, the Law of the Sea, the Convention on Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child? How are these to be applied to the Arctic? Fortunately, every player in the Arctic now acknowledges that the Law of the Sea should be the base of cooperation; even the US has done

this, although it has not ratified it. We have not yet started to look at the challenges of the Human Rights Convention or the Convention on the Rights of the Child and others. Do we then need new agreements? Your discussions in the next three days can play a constructive part by mapping out to what extent there is a need for a new legal framework to deal with this.

The sixth area is the institutional build-up for cooperation in the Arctic. Fortunately, the Arctic Council has developed from being a very loose organisation, meeting once a year and without a secretariat. Looking back on it, this was perhaps a great advantage. It allowed the Arctic Council to develop according to the ambitions and the responsibilities of each country as they rotated the chair between them. I have to admit – I will do so openly because I think especially we from Iceland and Greenland are able to say anything we want on these issues – that I am not sure if it is a good idea to establish a permanent secretariat for the Arctic Council. Why do I say this? Because the Arctic Council is not yet finally in the decisive stage. It is an evolving process. It needs to be an evolving process because the tasks and the challenges are so urgent; new ones will appear. If we make it into a traditional international organisation with a secretariat, annual meetings of the foreign ministers and a few ambassadors being given the task to deal with it during the presidency of each country, we might lose the dynamic nature of the Arctic Council. Now, however, this is useless speculation because it has already been decided to establish a secretariat. Even my own country wanted to host it. I think we should be aware that the loose structure of the Arctic Council allowed it to grow into the effective body it has become.

In my opinion the need for continuous institutional strengthening and build-up in the Arctic is not over. We have not reached the final stage.

The last area of the seven I wanted to mention here this morning is how this cooperation and problem solving, research and scientific dialogue in the Arctic, has become a model for other parts of the world. This was brought home to me, as I have sometimes said before, in a meeting a few years ago with the Minister of Environment in Bangladesh. It was a strange experience to sit on an open boat going through the areas that would be flooded in Bangladesh if the ice in our part of the world continues to melt.

The Minister started a detailed discussion on the institutional form of cooperation in the Arctic and the rights of indigenous peoples. Why did he do this? Because in addition to being a Minister, he was also a tribal

king of about four hundred thousand indigenous people in Bangladesh; that is more people than we have in Iceland! He wanted to claim similar rights and similar decision-making roles for his tribe as the organisations of the indigenous people in the Arctic have already been given.

I have encountered this in other places. There are similar situations, even if the climate is different, in Africa, Asia, Central America, Latin America and other parts of the world. The indigenous people have lived there for thousands of years with their traditions, cultures, languages and interests. We can be proud that in the Arctic and in the North, we have given the people who were here long before our states arrived a voice and a role which people who are in a similar position all over the world don't yet have.

In the discussion among ourselves in the Arctic and the North we should also be aware that we need to reach out and communicate with those people. As we did in Iceland last week, when we brought together for the first time scientists and scholars from the Himalayan regions; admittedly those primarily interested in glaciers and ice.

I have to tell you, my friends, it worked beautifully. I was not so sure beforehand how it would actually function. Would the dialogue be real? Would the issues be similar? Would the challenges be the same whether you were from Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, India or China or whether you were from Greenland or Alaska, the northern part of Russia, or Iceland? It was a remarkably successful dialogue.

So my final point is this. While we need to strengthen our dialogue and cooperation in the Arctic we also need to be aware that we have a global responsibility to reach out to those people.

We need a strong input from the scholarly community in these seven areas. Not in ten years' time, but here and now. The next five years will be crucial in determining whether we make a success of the Arctic and the North. If we fail, the consequences not just for us but for the rest of the world will be disastrous.