



The Emerging Arctic World Order

**A Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
The Arctic Imperative Summit
Alaska
26th August 2012**

*The speech was delivered without notes.
This is a transcript of the recording.*

Thank you very much, Alice, for these kind words. I was reflecting on it this morning that we have all read Alice in Wonderland. We know that it is a literary landmark but what we are witnessing here and also last year is ‘Alice in Alaska and in the Arctic,’ fast becoming not only an Arctic but also a global landmark! An extraordinary achievement.

I want to congratulate you and thank you for the initiative, for the vision and for the determination to bring together such an impressive and varied crowd of people. It has been a privilege for me to be with you last year and to come here again.

You have asked me to talk here this morning about the emerging Arctic world order. That is a pretty tall order to fulfil in twenty minutes or so. Let me begin by reminding all of us that up to the 1900s or so the Arctic was largely, both to us in the Arctic and definitely to the rest of the world, an unknown part of the world. By 2000, we had made it *our* Arctic. But I believe now, in this new century, it has already become the *global* Arctic. We can witness this almost every day. Maybe I will prove my point by showing you a few pictures.



This house was built over two hundred years ago. It was in the beginning of the 19th century the home of the only real school in my country. At that time the Arctic was, as I said, almost entirely unknown. When the Republic was founded in 1944, many people in Iceland had the idea of inviting the Arctic discoverer, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who was of Icelandic parenthood, to become the country's first president. As many of you might know, part of his claim to fame was that he discovered a region of the Canadian Arctic that nobody knew before. So this house also carries with it a part of the story of how the Arctic was discovered.

This picture was taken seven days ago when I invited the scientists and the crew of the Chinese icebreaker Snow Dragon, Xue Long, to my residence. It was the first journey of a Chinese icebreaker through the North East passage, from Shanghai to Iceland. The icebreaker is now on its way via the North Pole back to Shanghai. It was the first time that a Chinese icebreaker officially visited an Arctic state. It conducted scientific investigations in the Atlantic sector of the Arctic Ocean. It is the first Chinese ship to pass through the Arctic shipping route.

When this journey was discussed in my meetings with Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and Vice President Xi last year – Xi will probably by the end of this year become the next President of China – I said that of course we would welcome the Chinese icebreaker in my country. I was not entirely sure what would happen. But when Prime Minister Wen Jiabao came to Iceland three months ago, with a big delegation of Chinese ministers with him – the Foreign Minister, the Minister of Commerce, the Minister of Natural Resources, and some others – he announced that they had definitely decided to keep this promise.

Why was the Prime Minister of China in my small country with a big part of his cabinet; staying for three days? One reason is the clean

energy achievement of Iceland; the other is what is happening in the Arctic.

In order to repay the courtesy, I decided to visit the icebreaker and the next picture was taken in the Reykjavik harbor seven days ago with the leading scientists of the icebreaker, the officers of the crew, myself, the First Lady, the Chinese Ambassador and various distinguished officials of the Icelandic Foreign Ministry. When they invited me on board, they told me that I was the first President ever in the history of China, which is about six thousand years, to visit a Chinese icebreaker! I am particularly proud of that record.



I should probably add that to my Alaska record of being the first foreign President ever to visit Alaska! And with all due respect to all those who have served as Presidents of the United States, I think by now I have become the President who has visited Alaska most often while in office – even counting all US Presidents!

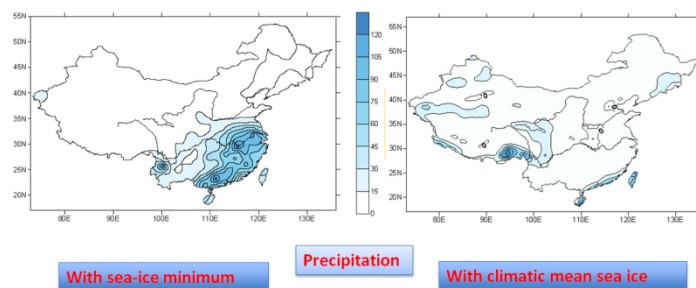
During our visit to the icebreaker, they gave us a thorough briefing on the ship. We visited the laboratories, and the other facilities on board. And then, the same day, we had a scientific symposium at the University of Iceland where this extraordinary gathering of young Chinese scientists presented part of their research and explained why they were in Iceland; why they were studying the ice and the seas, but above all how they were examining the relationship between the melting of the ice in the Arctic and the climate in China. The *direct* relationship between what is happening in our neighborhood and the potential of China for successful economic development in the years to come.

The impact of the melting Arctic sea ice on weather systems in China, as you can see on this picture (showing the experience of the winter of 2007-2008 following the sea ice minimum in 2007), creates weather hardships in China that have a direct implication for the everyday life of the people of that great country.

Freezing rain in southern China during the 07-08 winter after the Arctic summer sea-ice minimum in 2007



The heavy freezing rain would be weakened or disappear if there was no unusual sea-ice minimum in 2007

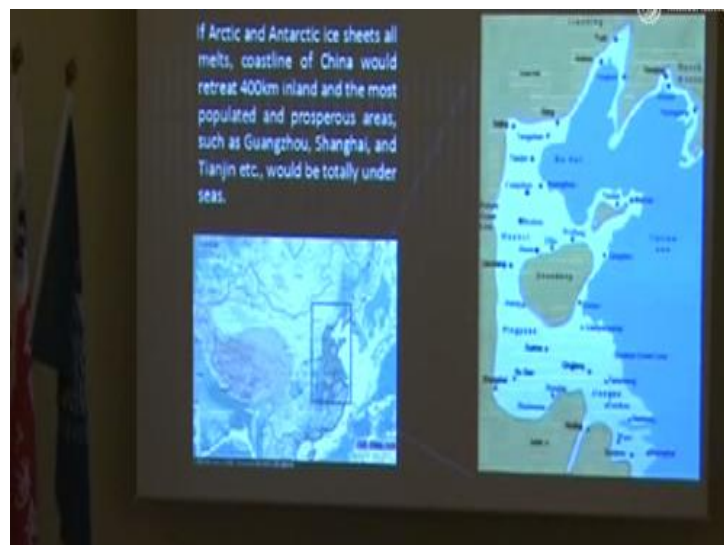


(Liu et al., 2011)

You can also see the difference in the heavy freezing rain between years with sea ice at a minimum and then with the mean sea ice. It was profoundly disturbing as well as moving to hear this young generation of Chinese scientists lay out this case and their worries at the University of Iceland a few days ago. If anybody doubted that the Chinese are now actively concerned about climate change and what is happening, not just

to us but to themselves already, not just in the years to come, but now, they should have attended this conference.

And the next picture, which was taken at the symposium at the University – that is why it is so dark - presents one of the slides that a very gifted but young Chinese scientist showed: the effect of sea level rise on China. The picture to the right shows the sea moving 400 kilometers inland with Shanghai disappearing completely and Beijing being surrounded by ocean water.



So, when we talk about the Arctic and climate change, the future of the Arctic, we should realize that what is happening in this part of the world is having profound effect on the biggest countries in the world. Therefore the concern and the interest of China in the Arctic is perfectly legitimate.

I will distribute here in this conference later today a brief Memo on the visit of Xue Long so you can have the details and the description of the topics covered, the nature of the visit and the future aims. We signed a Memorandum of Understanding between our scientific institutions and the Chinese Polar Research Institute. In it, they declared their intention to establish in the next few years a China-Nordic Arctic Center in Shanghai.

But China is not the only Asian country interested in the Arctic. At the beginning of the year I was invited to give the keynote address at the World Oceans Summit called together in Singapore by The Economist, which by the way was an interesting signal of growing concern about what is happening to the global oceans. In a meeting with the leadership of Singapore there was only one issue that they wanted to discuss. It was

this: When will Singapore be accepted as a permanent observer member of the Arctic Council? Is Iceland willing to support Singapore at a meeting of the Arctic Council?

A few weeks before that I was in Abu Dhabi. The Prime Minister of South Korea asked for a meeting. It was, I believe, the first meeting between a President of Iceland and a Prime Minister of South Korea. He also had only one item on his agenda: When will South Korea be accepted as a permanent observer member of the Arctic Council?

It is kind of strange that wherever I travel in Asia this is the item that they want to discuss. It shows that Russia is not the only country wanting a leadership role in the Arctic. China, South Korea, Singapore, India and many others now want to take an active role in how our neighborhood is being organized and cared for.

In the last few years President Putin, then Prime Minister, has shown extraordinary leadership in enhancing the interests of Russia in the Arctic – and has done it, in my opinion, in a way which should be welcomed. Of course, Russia has its own interests, both for security reasons, for geological reasons, for reasons of natural resources, as we all have who are in the Arctic.

But imagine if President Obama had traveled to Alaska last year to give the keynote address at the Arctic Imperative. And, imagine if he had come again this year to speak again – what kind of signal it would have been. That is what President Putin did for the two first major Arctic conferences that the Russian Geographical Society organized. He has committed himself personally and politically to a leadership role in this area in an extraordinary way; for a number of reasons.

First of all Russia will never successfully be able to plan the North Eastern sea route without strong participation by the other countries, including Norway, my own country and others. The Search and Rescue Agreement, partly led by Russia in the negotiations within the Arctic Council, is a manifestation of their genuine interest in such cooperation. The recent agreements with Norway on harnessing the oil and other natural resources in the Arctic are also, in my opinion, indications of these new times.

When we analyze the Arctic world order, we have to realize that China, other Asian countries, and Russia, have, in the last few years, become prominent players in our part of the world in a way which, I think, none of us when I first came to Alaska less than ten years ago would have thought possible in our lifetime.

But there is another element which I also want to introduce this morning. And that involves a country which has not yet reached the same diplomatic status but definitely is already a major player; and that is Greenland.

Greenland is not given its due role in these discussions, partly because Denmark still speaks on behalf of Greenland on foreign affairs. What is the size of Greenland? Yesterday Commissioner Sullivan very proudly pointed out that Alaska was twice the size of Texas. Greenland is half the size of Europe. You have to add together Germany, France, Italy and Spain and a few other European countries to get to the size of Greenland. The extraordinary riches of natural resources that Greenland harbors now mean that the Government of Greenland, led by a young generation of professional, dedicated and inspiring young leaders, has to deal with a long queue of many of the most powerful and best organized global corporations which want to get access to this future secret of the Arctic.

No Arctic world order can be, in my opinion, thoroughly discussed, planned or decided on unless the people of Greenland, through their own government, have a full participation – whatever the diplomatic status is – in our common decision-making. That is why I am happy to have my friend representing the Greenland Government, the new Greenland Government, here at this meeting. I don't know if many ministers from the Government of Greenland have visited Alaska before but I definitely think it is a signal of the new times that he is here with us. I know from my own conversation with the Prime Minister of Greenland that he would have liked to be here but unfortunately his schedule did not allow it. I believe very strongly that within a dialog on the Arctic's future, Alaska, Greenland and Iceland have a lot in common. We should coordinate our discussions and policy-making in a significant way.

We all know, as we have seen in this conference, that the growing interest in the Arctic depends on the resources, the energy, the minerals, the emerging sea routes, the effects on global shipping, the growing tourism and the fisheries. I am not going to speak about these elements because we all know their significance.

But the key factor is that now every nation in the world realizes that mankind lives in an ice-dependent world. This is something new. It is a basis for global cooperation, dialog and policy-making which has never existed before. The recognition and the awareness that whatever our nationality is, wherever on the globe we are, we all live in an ice-dependent world. What is happening to the ice-covered areas of the world, will not only move the coastline of China 400 kilometers inland,

and drown Shanghai and many other cities, and will not only change the weather patterns for people in every continent of the world, but is perhaps the single most important factor – and I know it is a strong statement – the single most important factor affecting the future of our children and grandchildren: What will happen to our ice-dependent world.

In order to get people's attention, because it is kind of difficult to get people to realize this, I created recently this phrase: *The AHA future*. You probably don't understand what I am arriving at. But we all know of many AHA moments; when we suddenly discover something, when we suddenly see a new path, and we understand what the other guy was talking about – the 'Aha!' moment. The world needs now desperately and urgently a new 'Aha!' moment. And this AHA stands for Arctic, Himalayas and Antarctica – the three most ice-covered areas in the world.

They are all related. They all have a profound impact on the future of the world. It is the interrelationship between what is happening in the Arctic, in the Himalayas and in Antarctica that needs to be understood. That is why I have not only been engaged in active cooperation in the Arctic, but have also tried to encourage cooperation among the Himalayan countries, hosting the Third Pole Environment Workshop in Iceland last year; The Third Pole being a very clever phrase which the Chinese Tibetan Institute has created to get away from the political connotations of Tibet or other parts of the Himalayas.

The AHA moment! This is what we all need to work on – to make every political leader, every corporate leader, every citizen of the world realize that our AHA future is really the most important issue that must dominate our discussions.

What about the United States and Alaska in this new world order? It is a kind of sad story. I have always been frank with my American friends ever since I started going to Congress in the 1980s, lobbying the House of Representatives and the Senate, continuing to lobby Congress while President. It is a testimony to the extraordinary democratic system of this country that I can come from Iceland, both before I became President and also after, and to some extent be a player within your own political system. It is a testimony to the tolerance, the wisdom, the openness, and the strength of American democracy and its institutions.

I have learned a lot from my cooperation and dialog with American leaders, both in your political world, and the corporate world, and above all in the scientific world. I have learned a lot from my visits to Alaska. That is why I am sad to have to bear witness to, as my friend Lisa Murkowski and others did yesterday, that what is lacking in this new

world order of the Arctic is a more active involvement and presence of the United States.

When Hillary became Secretary of State I rejoiced. We had had long conversations on the Arctic. I will never forget when Wally Hickel, Mead Treadwell and myself went up to her Senate office in a little bit of a storm which the Washington Weather Bureau called a hurricane. Therefore Congress was closed and every Department in Washington but Wally Hickel and I came from Alaska and Iceland. We didn't let the storm stop us. And Hillary was the only Senator left on the Hill! We went up there to talk to her about the future of the Arctic.

She became Secretary of State and never before had anybody taken that office with so much knowledge and awareness of the importance of the Arctic. So the problem is not a lack of knowledge or a lack of information. There is something more profound in the political system of the United States that prevents Washington from becoming as active as China is now in the Arctic. I will say this again: To become as active as China is now in the Arctic. I am not talking about Russia. It will take you a long time to catch up with Russia in your involvement in the Arctic. But you will hopefully in the next few years match China in its interest in the Arctic.

I don't really know how to move Washington forward on this issue. That is why I believe Alaska has a particular role. Because everybody in the Arctic – my country, Russia, Canada, the other Nordic countries, the Asian players and everybody else – accepts the role of Alaska in this dialog. Almost as if Alaska was an independent player in this new game. That is why I think you here in Alaska have an extraordinary responsibility given the vacuum that unfortunately, to a large extent compared to the others, exists in Washington and given the delays that will be caused by the Presidential election.

Alaska has an extraordinary responsibility to take the leadership, a leadership which all of us would welcome and would, I believe, also create extraordinary opportunities for the Alaskan economy, for the people of Alaska, for your indigenous people, for your universities as well as for the political and the social leadership of this state, but above all give the young people of Alaska a new sense of vision and a new sense of the future.

That is why I came up with the idea that in order to get the US moving, maybe everybody in Alaska, whether you are a Republican or Democrat, or independent, should come together and make a joint effort to make sure that both Obama and Romney commit themselves, before the election, to host an Arctic Summit in Alaska some time in the next

term. As Richard Nixon said: Nothing concentrates the mind of the Departments and the bureaucracies more than a summit.

An Arctic Summit could be hosted during the US Presidency of the Arctic Council or in relation to the anniversary of when Alaska became a US territory – there are many anniversaries in the next two years that you can relate this to. But I say this, my friends, very seriously: I think all of you in Alaska should get together, whether you are a Republican or Independent or a Democrat, and make a united effort to commit both candidates to calling for a summit of the leaders of the eight Arctic countries in Alaska in the next two years. This has never been done before. I believe it would be a very strong signal, showing that the US has arrived in a significant way in its proper and legitimate leadership role in this part of the world. Quite frankly, I cannot see how the United States of America is going to conduct a comprehensive, responsible and visionary foreign policy in the coming decades without being a leader in the Arctic.

So, whereas it was before the isolated Arctic, and then *our* Arctic, it has now become the *global* Arctic. Whether we like it or not, this is a fact. And it must be the basis of our operations. But, there is a problem. We need a more extensive dialog on the policies and the progress which could inspire decisions with respect to the Arctic. We need to create a network for influence and democratic participation where everybody who is interested and concerned and who lives in the Arctic can come together, whatever the form or positions, and have a legitimate role in the future of the Arctic.

I talked a little bit about this in my speech last year. I hope that with your cooperation, and in partnership with Alice and others, we can really bring this about; that we can move all these different Arctic conferences together in a very strong movement which coordinates all our efforts so we can *truly* have a fundamental influence on the future of the Arctic.

We should not only have a *global* Arctic, we must also have a *democratic* Arctic. That is why your political traditions in Alaska are very relevant; why the invitations to the mayors of the small communities to participate in this conference is visionary; why the formal access of the organization of the indigenous people to the Arctic Council is a landmark vision in global affairs.

If we can combine a *global* Arctic with a *democratic* Arctic we will be on the right path.