



**THE NORDIC COUNTRIES
IN A
GLOBAL ARCTIC**

**Speech
by the President of Iceland
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at the
Arctic Dialogue Conference
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Your Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

As we assemble here in Bodö to discuss the future of Arctic cooperation it is worth reflecting how recently, in historic terms, the modern world became familiar with the remote, vast, unknown northern regions.

My father was still a young shepherd chasing sheep in Icelandic valleys when the famous Norwegian discoverers, Amundsen and Nansen, made their pioneering Arctic journeys. Together with their Icelandic-Canadian colleague Vilhjalmur Stefansson, they embodied, in the early decades of the 20th century, a spirit of discovery that was widely admired.

So fresh in living memory were their explorations that the generations which celebrated the independence of Norway and Iceland saw them as their respective national heroes.

And yet, throughout the 20th century, the Arctic remained largely unknown except to the indigenous people who for millennia had made it their home. The escalating military build-up across the northern regions, from Alaska to Murmansk, placed it at the heart of the Cold War confrontation, a no-go zone during almost the entire second half of that century.

Thus, in historic terms, compared to the thousand years of European and Asian civilizations, the Arctic as a territory of cooperation, as a playing field of economic and political progress, is practically like a new planet; a region so young in global context that it is almost without parallel.

When the Arctic Council was established in the 1990s, the eight member states were still so hesitant in their endeavours that the mandate was very limited, mostly restricted to science and the environment; a rotating chairmanship and no permanent secretariat.

I have outlined this transformation in order to remind us all how well the Arctic Council has matured, transformed into a successful instrument of treaty negotiations, wide-ranging agreements and practical endeavours. And even more remarkably: After the decision by the Kiruna Ministerial Meeting of last year, from now on more than half of the G-20 countries, including leading states in Europe and Asia, will in one way or another be at the Arctic table.

The Arctic, still remote and unknown at the outset of the 20th century, has now become a new global playing field where prominent economic and political forces of our times move gradually towards securing their long-term presence and interests.

This transformation brings the Nordic countries not only new challenges and opportunities but also makes it our common duty to pave the way for enlightened policies; to make responsible and informed decision-making the cornerstone of the Arctic future, to guard its sensitive ecosystems and base the use of natural resources on a profound respect for the environment.

The Nordic countries come to the Arctic table with a half a century's experience of close cooperation, mutual trust and a common political heritage; with a vision of economic progress in which the well-being of the people is the test of success.

These strong Nordic ingredients undoubtedly played a significant part in the successful evolution of the Arctic Council, especially in the period from the time of publication of the Arctic Climate Assessment Report and the Arctic Human Development Report under the Icelandic chairmanship a decade ago, to the Swedish leadership at the historic Kiruna meeting.

The Nordic states brought their tradition of cooperation to a new forum in which, at the end of the Cold War, the United States and Russia suddenly found themselves together, along with Canada, facing new

challenges and the need for successful cooperation. In the light of recent events the prevailing positive engagement of Russia and the United States in the Arctic is a significant reminder that productive cooperation is indeed possible.

Undoubtedly the successful chairmanships of the Nordic countries were of key importance during the formative years of the Arctic Council, creating a record of reference for the North American leadership, Canada holding the chairmanship now and the United States taking over next year.

It is also worth noting how far Nordic-Arctic contribution has been influenced by our democratic and open traditions of decision-making, how public participation, the involvement of indigenous people and citizen's organisations, scientists, experts and other social actors has characterized our approach to Arctic issues.

This has been demonstrated in a multitude of fora, from gatherings in Rovaniemi in Finland to the Arctic Frontier in Tromsö; and most recently by the establishment of the Arctic Circle, which held its first Assembly in Reykjavik last October, attended by over 1,200 participants from more than 40 countries, reflecting strongly the wide-ranging international interest in the Arctic and the great variety of players now active in the Arctic dialogue; the dramatic highlight being perhaps the exchange between the leader of Greenpeace and the Russian explorer and Parliament member Artur Chilingarov in front of the big Arctic Circle crowd in Reykjavik; our Nordic democratic tradition bringing about the only open encounter by Greenpeace and Russian leadership during the entire 'Arctic 30' episode.

That first Assembly of the Arctic Circle in Reykjavik thus became like a village where everyone could participate and each voice was heard, where the warmth of human dialogue hopefully paved the way to success in one of the toughest environments on Mother Earth; a spirit which we will strive to preserve when the second Assembly comes together in Reykjavík at the end of October.

As new states from Asia and Europe – and perhaps from Latin America and the Middle East in coming years – enter the Arctic venue, and as more wide-ranging issues come onto our agenda, it is of the utmost importance to maintain the essence and the well-established qualities of our cooperation, which both the Arctic Council and a multitude of Arctic organisations, institutions and associations have helped to develop.

Three of these are especially relevant:

First: To maintain the culture of an open dialogue and informal style of deliberation and the enduring personal friendship and mutual respect which have made the Arctic Council and other Arctic venues so successful in recent years. When new partners arrive on the scene, who perhaps are used to more formalized and bureaucratic diplomatic encounters, it is important that they adjust to our productive and practical Arctic culture.

Second: The pre-eminent role of science and research in Arctic policy-making must be maintained. Knowledge, based on expert advice and scientific projects, has been the foundation of our decisions and a guiding principle in making Arctic cooperation so successful. Respect for facts and scientific evidence, and for the vulnerable ecosystem, has been more important than displays of political and economic power.

Third: In the dialogue within the Arctic Council, indigenous people and their organisations and representatives have been a significant part of the process, prioritizing an open and democratic approach to our common Arctic future. No other international forum of states has, in recent years, been so respectful of indigenous peoples, their traditions and interests.

These three dimensions have been of key importance for the success of Arctic cooperation and must be maintained effectively in the coming years. They are, to some extent, what I have termed the 'Arctic House Rules' which I am sure our new visitors and partners will gladly respect.

There are many examples from the last three years of how Nordic initiatives and involvements have helped to move the Arctic dialogue forward, both by strengthening positive engagement by Russia and the United States and by mapping out a constructive role for new partners, for example China, India and France.

Last year the Presidents of Finland and Iceland joined the President of the Russian Federation at the Arctic conference in Salekhard, organised by the old and distinguished Russian Geographical Society.

In October a strong American delegation participated in the Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik, bringing messages from both the Secretary of State, John Kerry, his predecessor, Hillary Clinton, and three US Senators. With the other distinguished US participants it became the highest-level American involvement in any non-governmental Arctic conference.

When the Snow Dragon, Xuelong, with over 60 scientists working for the China Polar Institute, sailed from Shanghai to Iceland in 2012, the first Chinese vessel to journey through the northern sea route to an Arctic

state, a memorandum was signed at the University of Iceland by the Polar Research Institute of China and the Icelandic Centre for Research. It included a declaration to work towards establishing in Shanghai a China-Nordic Arctic Research Centre. This plan was then taken further when Nordic scientists participated in a conference in Shanghai where the China-Nordic Research Centre (CNARC), was established last December. The inauguration treaty was signed by ten member institutes – four of which are Chinese and six Nordic. The Norwegian partners are the Fridtjof Nansen Institute (FNI) in Oslo and the Norwegian Polar Institute (NPI) in Tromsø. This coming summer, Chinese and Nordic scientists will again meet in Iceland to map out further steps in this interesting Sino-Arctic cooperation.

I have also been privileged to embrace the strong interest of France in the Arctic through cooperation with the distinguished French statesman Michel Rocard, a special ambassador of the President of France to the Polar Regions, first appointed by Nicolas Sarkozy and then reconfirmed by President Hollande.

Almost a year ago, in meetings with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and other Ministers in Delhi and at a conference on the Himalayan glaciers in Dehradun in India, I witnessed great interest in the Arctic; and also how the nations in the Himalayas, which are affected by melting glaciers and changing water systems but hampered by long-term distrust and hostilities, want to learn from the success of Arctic cooperation.

All these – and many other examples – illustrate the multiple opportunities and challenges which growing interests and engagements in the Arctic are bringing to the Nordic nations.

Whereas in previous decades, Nordic cooperation was primarily of importance to ourselves, the transformation of the Arctic has given the Nordic partners a new and significant global role, constituting a new call to duty: To serve the future of the Arctic in accordance with the best of Nordic traditions.

That is and will be the test of our endeavours.