



**A Speech**  
**by**  
**the President of Iceland**  
**Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson**  
**at the Himalaya-Third Pole Circle**

**Thimphu, Bhutan**  
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Your Royal Highnesses  
Honorable Prime Minister  
Your Excellencies  
Distinguished officials, scientists and experts  
Dear friends

As our discussions and deliberations commence, I should like to express my profound thanks to His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck and the Royal Government of Bhutan for their visionary support, their engagement in furthering our cooperation on the future of the Himalaya-Third Pole region, cooperation aimed at highlighting the retreat of the glaciers, the transformation of the ecology and water reservoirs, the impact on the great rivers of Asia, the food security and economic well-being of close to two billion people.

The main ice-covered areas of our Planet – Antarctica, the Arctic and the Himalayas; or the three Poles in the recent illuminating terminology – were for millennia outside the knowledge and concerns of the enlightened world; the first explorers went to Antarctica and the North Pole a little over a century ago. Since ancient times, however, the indigenous inhabitants of the Himalayas and the Arctic had adapted their customs and cultures to living in harmony with the ice,

gaining wisdom from struggles with the elements, learning more from Mother Nature than most of us working for university degrees.

Among these three prominent parts of our planet, the Himalayas and the Arctic share a fundamental characteristic: They are homes to nations and communities, territories which share boundaries and economic interests, a history of military build-ups and potential conflicts. They are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the theatre where the interaction between people and ice is most complex in its composition and consequences; their future will be of monumental global significance.

And yet, cooperation, dialogue, and research on the Arctic and the Himalayan-Third Pole regions, are still, in historical terms, in their early stages; a somewhat alarming state of affairs, since the clock of irreversible climate change is ticking ever faster.

In the Arctic, however, the process of cooperation started with the end of the Cold War, evolving in the 1990s into a formalized inter-governmental activity with the establishment of the Arctic Council where, in recent years, China, India, Japan, Singapore, and Korea have gained observer status; thus, acknowledging the global impact, notably for Asia, of changes in the Arctic. In addition, numerous Arctic gatherings have consolidated an extensive dialogue, open to all interested participants. Of these the Arctic Circle, established nearly three years ago, has become the most significant; its Assemblies attended by about 1500 participants from 40 countries.

Among the nations and communities in the Himalayan-Third Pole regions, the process has been slower and less systematic, although our gathering here in Bhutan and previous meetings in India, China, Nepal and Iceland, have helped to consolidate our progress.

The ground was prepared by the Third Pole Environmental Workshops, held first in Beijing and then in Kathmandu. Subsequently, I was privileged to host the third Workshop in Iceland in 2011, when we also mandated the Northern Research Forum to bring a gathering of distinguished Arctic experts into the Himalaya-Third Pole dialogue; an important landmark when such an Arctic-Himalayan cooperation was convened; a process which continued two years later at the First Assembly of the Arctic Circle in Reykjavík; benefitting from three days of discussions on Arctic lessons for the Himalayas.

The meeting in Dehradun, India, in 2013 allowed us to map out the next steps and set the stage for cooperation with ICIMOD as well as the Skoll Global Threats Fund and Carnegie Corporation, which provided support, wisdom, and experience.

Thus, we gradually formulated the essence of the Himalayan-Third Pole Circle which now convenes here in Bhutan, aiming to outline a roadmap for the next stages in this evolution, advancing permanent structures of cooperation amongst the Himalayan-Third Pole nations and communities, using as a model of reference what is now firmly established in the Arctic.

Some might ask what brings the President of Iceland into such a journey. The answer is both personal and substantial. I have, for years, been privileged to learn from my encounters and exchanges with representatives and friends from some of the Himalayan countries, including India and China; an experience which has deeply influenced my views and global vision. Furthermore, by representing one of the smaller nations in the Arctic, I know what is at stake for the communities in the Himalayas. It might also help my engagement that I come from a small democratic nation with no armed forces and no global ambitions. An Icelander coming to the Himalaya-Third Pole region has neither ulterior motives nor economic or military interests but carries only the good faith derived from experiencing successful cooperation in the Arctic.

I also declare a long-standing concern about the looming threat of irreversible and disastrous climate change, a view moulded by witnessing the fast retreat of the Icelandic glaciers, which are the largest in Europe; and affinity with the people of the mountains wherever they are, even in far-away countries and continents.

My journey to Bhutan and commitment to the Himalayan-Third Pole process are also inspired by the belief that together we can learn from each other and consolidate a successful progress towards a systematic cooperation where ultimately governments and authorities, together with communities of scientists and concerned inhabitants, provide leadership and guidance within more formalized structures, inspired by good faith and a profound understanding of what is at stake.

There is mounting evidence of how the retreating glaciers will impact the rivers and the water systems in the Himalayan countries, directing our attention to the dramatic consequences for food and energy production, security and international relations.

Glacial melting contributes up to 45% of the total river flow in the tributaries of the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra. Water from these three rivers is crucial for the food security of 500 million people; they are the life-lines of some of Asia's most densely populated areas, from the arid plains of Pakistan to the thirsty metropolises of Northern China 3,000 miles away. Around two billion people in more than a dozen countries – nearly a third of the world's population – depend in one way or another on rivers fed, at least partly, by the snow and ice of the Himalaya-Third Pole region.

And yet so scarce is the available data that the term “white spot” has been used in relation to the Himalayas to highlight the limited scientific efforts, the alarming lack of research.

Although scientifically the picture is incomplete, recent reports indicate that melt-water contributes 30% of the total flow of water in the eastern Himalayas, 50% in the central and western Himalaya and up to 60-80% in the Karakoram mountains of Pakistan; information of monumental importance. The Indus, flowing from the Karakoram mountains and through one of the most sensitive and complicated geopolitical spots on earth, sustains some 200 million people and is the lifeline for food production in both India and Pakistan, countries where agriculture accounts for almost a fifth of national GDP and employs half the labour force. The result of increasing demands on the river is that some days it does not even reach the sea. According to the World Bank Pakistan has already reached the limit of its available resources; it will require 30% more water by 2025 to meet rising agricultural, domestic and industrial needs.

Such scenarios, linked to predictions about the likely developments in the high mountains, are truly alarming. Yao Tandong, a leading glaciologist of the Himalaya-Third Pole region, who had planned to be with us here today, has warned that in twenty years time another 30% of the Himalayan glaciers will have disappeared and by the middle of this century perhaps 40%; in all likelihood, 70% by the beginning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century. If such full-scale shrinkage takes place, it will eventually lead to monumental ecological, political, economic and possibly military catastrophes.

The need for sharing data and research across national boundaries is thus of paramount importance, reminding us of how, a quarter of a century ago, a network of scientific collaboration across the Arctic gradually set the stage for political confidence which proved sufficient to establish the Arctic Council in the 1990s. In the first years, however, its mandate was mostly restricted to scientific and environmental cooperation, assessing how the melting of the ice influenced the prospects for human and economic development.

As in the Arctic, the ecosystems of the Himalayas are particularly sensitive to climate change; the number of people affected being, of course, far greater; indeed the potential transformation of the great Asian rivers would influence the fate of hundreds of millions of people.

But as in the Arctic, science and research in the Himalayas must become the basis of successful policies and informed diplomatic and political cooperation.

Another dimension of similarity between these two significant parts of Planet Earth is that both have their boundaries divided between two leading global powers, on the one hand, and a group of small and medium-sized nations on the other.

Furthermore, what happens to the glaciers and the ice in the Himalayas and the Arctic has profound consequences for weather patterns and climate on other continents.

Water is indeed the common factor, whether it is frozen in glaciers or sea-ice, or flowing in rivers from one Asian country to another, or stored in the great oceans of our planet. What happens to water, frozen or fluid, in our respective homelands, the Himalayas and the Arctic, is a core determinant of the global future.

Thus a few years ago I became convinced of the need to utilise my experience in Arctic cooperation towards helping to further the evolution of increased dialogue among scientists, experts, and policy-makers in the Himalayan-Third Pole region. I consequently agreed to lend my personal patronage to the establishment of the Himalayan-Third Pole Circle as an informal, open and dynamic venue for enhanced dialogue and information-sharing, cooperation on successful projects and informed efforts and endeavours; hopefully preparing the ground for systematic and more formalized engagement by institutions and organisations and ultimately governments and authorities in the Himalayan region; seeking inspiration and encouragement from how China and India sought, and were granted, a formal role as observer states in the Arctic Council, thus becoming our partners in a range of activities relating to the ice-covered areas in my part of the world.

The fundamental purpose of the Himalayan-Third Pole Circle is to be of service to the people in the region, to be helpful in bringing together all those who can contribute in significant and substantive ways, facilitating more scientific research and expert collaboration, addressing the challenges faced by nations and communities, bringing together the fields of science and policy formulations, preparing the ground for constructive actions within more permanent structures.

In the coming years and decades the region will be faced with challenges that will make collaboration an absolute prerequisite for a meaningful understanding, informing policies and actions. That is why we are gathered here today, aiming to sustain a dialogue and to examine the possibilities for collaboration. It is therefore encouraging and indeed a special pleasure, as we celebrate the involvement of the Royal Government of Bhutan, to see in the audience high-level and established representatives from China, India, Pakistan,

Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Every country of the Himalaya-Third Pole region is represented.

The meeting here in Bhutan is an important stage in the evolution of this cooperation and could, through our dialogue, lead to the formulation of an informal roadmap, outlining further progress, involving consultation with authorities, institutions and officials in the relevant countries, analysis by experts of specific challenges and concerns, formulating guidelines on how best to proceed and utilising efforts by small task forces directed at obtaining views and insights from those in key positions.

All this could then be brought together in follow-up meetings, making the next twelve to twenty four-months a period of concentrated efforts.

We all know that there is much at stake: no less than the fate and the harmonious co-existence of the Himalayan nations, as well as the future of others, both near and afar. We have, therefore, come to Bhutan because each and every one of us is committed to be of service.

Bhutan demonstrates, perhaps more than any other Himalayan country, how the entire future of a nation is linked to changes in the glaciers and the transformation of lakes and rivers. It is an inspiring place to enlighten our journey, and I thank again His Majesty and the Royal Government of Bhutan for their support and their engagement in our efforts.

I also thank ICIMOD for lending its institutional strength and advanced body of knowledge to the evolution of our dialogue and the Skoll Global Threats Fund, the Carnegie Corporation and others for their visionary support. My sincere thanks also go to Dagfinnur Sveinbjörnsson, who has demonstrated his long-standing commitment and diligence, never tiring of building bridges and bringing others onto this journey.

I hope that our deliberations will significantly further cooperation and good will among the people of Himalaya. May the spirit of Bhutan give our meeting both wisdom and visionary guidance.