



CLIMATE CHANGE AND NEW SECURITY ISSUES

**A Speech
by
the President of Iceland
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Your Excellency,
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honour and a privilege to address you here this morning on a subject which for the last ten years has profoundly influenced my responsibilities and intellectual journey.

For a long time it was an uphill battle to have these matters addressed because the doubters and the nay-sayers often occupied centre stage. But recently we have seen a fundamental shift, primarily because the evidence is now overwhelming. The latest research on the Arctic and the Greenland icesheet indicates that the extent of the melting which was previously expected to occur in the middle of the 21st century has already been reached.

The people of Iceland witness the alarming melting rate of our glaciers, which have long been the largest in Europe. The pace of retreat is now so striking that some mountains and valleys which have been covered by ice for centuries are now visible for the first time.

My country can be described as a theatre of the climate change process. This is not only because it has the largest glaciers in Europe but also because we struggle with the largest desert in Europe. We are also very much aware of how the Gulf Stream encircles our island, joining with the water produced by the melting of the Arctic and so creating what can be described as the motor which drives the global conveyor belt of ocean currents, influencing the climate in Asia, Africa and the Americas.

Iceland can also serve as an inspiration, as an example of how to battle climate change through comprehensive transformation of the energy systems. In the early years of my life, over 80% of Iceland's energy needs were met by using coal and oil. Now 100% of our electricity is produced from clean energy sources, and over 75% of our total energy needs, including fuel for cars and shipping, are met by hydro or geothermal power. Within the lifetime of one generation, we have transformed Iceland from being predominantly a fossil-fuel user into a world leader as regards the production and consumption of clean energy.

I strongly believe that if we could do this, so can others. The fight against climate change is fundamentally about the future of energy. Global warming could clearly be slowed down or even averted if the Icelandic model were followed on a global scale by utilizing the variety of clean energy resources available to every country.

The problem is, however, that time is short and the hurdles are enormous. Unfortunately, it seems wise to prepare our nations and the international community for dealing with the consequences of climate change.

A formidable body of scientists estimates that we only have 10 – 15 years to transform our energy systems in ways which could prevent irreversible effects of climate change. Others argue we might have 20 – 30 years. In either case, it is a very short time. Even the ultimate optimist might find it difficult to believe that our national economies and our global system could be radically altered within such a short time-span.

I do, however, believe that it can be done. In this sense I am the ultimate optimist, yet I am also a realist, moulded by decades of involvement in national and international politics and decision-making. I know that the pace of reform can be slow and frustrating. Even if you can lead the horse to the water, with strong and persistent goading, it is not easy to make him drink.

It therefore seems to me to be prudent to follow two simultaneous and parallel courses of action.

One involves the transformation of our energy systems, our lifestyles, our societies and our economies, in order to minimize, and preferably prevent, climate change. Although this is a colossal task, it can be achieved, especially if we are guided by the same sort of vision and confidence as inspired the ending of the Cold War and brought mankind through the Great Depression and two World Wars into a new security framework.

The other course of action consists of preparing for the disastrous consequences of the global warming which is now already on the horizon, to engage in a comprehensive and profound dialogue on the new security challenges and to map out how global and regional institutions could tackle the tasks ahead.

When the Security Council met in 2007 to discuss climate change, some doubted that it was the proper forum for such a discussion. Margaret Beckett, then the British Foreign Secretary, argued that the conflict erupting in Sudan was an example of a crisis which climate change would only make worse. In the UK concept paper, it was argued that since no other international forum had addressed these challenges, a discussion by the Security Council would make a useful initial contribution, dealing with such questions as how the Security Council could play a part in a more integrated approach to conflict prevention in connection to climate-related factors and how the international community could prepare more effectively to support states or regions facing increased risks of instability due to these same factors.

Others argued that the Security Council was not the right venue for these discussions; they said that the General Assembly, on the other hand, where all member countries were represented, was the appropriate forum.

Whatever position one takes on these procedural questions, it is clear that in the year which has passed since the Security Council held its open debate on the relationship between energy, climate and security, a consensus has emerged that security challenges caused by climate change must be addressed urgently and in a comprehensive manner.

The International Alert report last November claimed to identify "forty-six countries at risk of violent conflict and a further fifty-six facing a high risk of instability as a result of climate change." The UNEP Executive Director, Achim Steiner, and other speakers, warned the Bali Conference that climate change was indeed a security issue. Scholars at the University of Hong Kong have reminded us that "it was the oscillations of agricultural production brought about by a long-term climate change that drove China's historical war-peace cycles."

Three weeks ago, Javier Solana, together with the European Commission, presented a report to European heads of state and government. Its core argument was that climate change is already having a profound impact on international security and that this development will be intensified in the years ahead, because climate change aggravates the stresses and the strains within and between countries, threatening to overburden those countries and regions which are already fragile and conflict-prone.

Javier Solana emphasised that those most affected by climate change are not the countries most responsible for causing it, but rather the poorer and the least developed nations. Thus, climate change could intensify the north-south resentment and pit major polluters against those most seriously affected, widening an already troubling divide.

That report was the EU's first in-depth study of the impact of global warming on security policies. A week later it was made known in Britain that Prime Minister Brown intended to establish a national security council designed to combat the threats of terrorism and climate change.

Increasingly, many small island states are giving high priority to these security concerns. For them, the prospect of a rise in the sea level and destructive hurricanes poses a greater threat than any military scenarios have done up to now.

Similarly, continental states with long and low coasts are rapidly becoming aware of what could happen. This applies to prosperous and poor nations alike. Around a fifth of the planet's population lives in coastal areas which are threatened by rising sea levels. Hurricane Katrina and the fate of New Orleans was therefore a wake-up call, not just for the United States but also others.

On my visit to India last February, where I was accompanied by Icelandic experts, both in glaciology and economic and social development, we entered into a missionary dialogue with prominent Indian leaders and scientists in order to raise the alarm over what is happening to the glaciers in the Himalayas. This is a development that has hitherto been among the most neglected parts of the global climate change debate.

These glaciers have created great water reservoirs for almost 700 million people on the Indian side alone, and provided the basis for both food and energy production. If China and other Himalayan states are included, the impact of the melting of the Himalayan glaciers could drastically affect the livelihood, the food and the economic security of over a billion people.

Although more research needs to be done, some experts already predict that the Himalayan glaciers might disappear completely within the next 40-70 years – an alarming prospect for nations which together account for one third of mankind.

Yet there is no regional mechanism for dealing with this problem, for promoting the necessary scientific or policy cooperation. Perhaps the Arctic Council, which was established in the 1990s by eight countries

encircling the Arctic, including the United States and Russia, could serve as a model for a new Himalayan Council. Like the Arctic Council, it could initially serve as a forum for the promotion of the necessary research and consequently help to evolve a constructive dialogue on how to meet these challenges.

The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, published by the Arctic Council in 2004 and based on work by scientists in the eight founding countries, was the most systematic and extensive account of recent climate change until the IPCC published its comprehensive statement last year. The Arctic report demonstrated that climate change was taking place three times faster in the northern regions than in any other part of the world. The Arctic Council can thus provide both important lessons and constructive guidelines for India, China and other Himalayan states which could prepare for what might happen in the next few decades by initiating a similar programme of scientific cooperation.

Although the prospect in the Himalayas is among the most alarming ones to be found, we must acknowledge that all nations, wherever they are in the world, will be disastrously affected by climate change. It is therefore necessary that every state become a constructive partner in an advanced global dialogue on the security implications of climate change, even if this dialogue is mostly of an exploratory nature in the early phases.

We need to move from the old ways of looking at national, regional and international security towards the unfamiliar yet urgent challenges that lie ahead. The international institutions which were established in the aftermath of the Second World War were based on traditional security analysis. It is now important to emphasise, as the recent EU report argues, that "the multilateral system is at risk if the international community fails to address the threats" associated with climate change.

It is therefore timely and wise to start examining these new security issues systematically. The following list of ten relevant areas, based on an analysis by experts and scientists, alerts us to the complicated task involved, to the conflicts which the warming of the planet could create:

1. Widespread water crises caused by the drying up of lakes and rivers, by the spreading of deserts and melting of glaciers. Since many of the Earth's biggest rivers run through many countries, the drying up could cause nations to take drastic and even military action to secure their own water supplies. Already, water systems in the Middle East are under intensive stress. Two-thirds of the Arab world depends on water resources originating outside their borders, and Israel might lose 60% of its water supply this

century. China with a fifth of mankind only has access to a small part of the global water reserves.

2. In all continents, the reduction of arable land will have a severe impact on food security and create an acute crisis for hundreds of millions of people. Historically, conflicts over water and land, the basis of agricultural production, have led to wars in Europe and elsewhere. Climate change would introduce gigantic dimensions into these traditional causes of military conflict.
3. Increased flooding and prolonged droughts would intensify these developments and make it extremely difficult to deal with them in a comprehensive and systematic way, especially in view of the fourth item on my list.
4. Migration between states, regions and even continents could reach a level hitherto unknown. The migrants would be climate refugees trying to escape droughts, hunger, water shortages and rising sea levels; looking for new and secure homes because theirs have been destroyed by storms or flooding. Almost two billion Asians live within 35 miles of the coastlines and a large proportion of them will lose their homes as a result of rising sea levels. The Tsunami tragedy in the Indian Ocean three years ago gives us an idea of what could happen.
5. The urge to enter countries which fare better in an era of climate change could grow to such an extent that all the resources and capabilities of those fortunate countries would be threatened to the same degree as if they were faced with a massive military invasion. Furthermore, deep-rooted ethnic and religious tensions could escalate and might lead to radicalisation and conflicts that would prove almost impossible to control.
6. Fragile and weak states would be in danger of collapsing, and small island states could see all or most of their territories disappear. Thus, entire state structures could wither away, leaving the populations in a political no-man's land and entirely reliant on emergency aid from abroad. Similarly, communities within states, communities with special ethnic or historical characteristics, might see their land destroyed, causing great strains on the capacity of the respective national governments. The consequences could be some form of civil war or other prolonged conflicts.
7. Climate change will also have a dramatic impact on our energy systems, on our capacity to generate electricity and harness the

power which is the basis of our economic prosperity. Rising sea levels could damage oil and gas reservoirs and make some inaccessible. We have only to call to mind the problems of the Middle East in recent decades and the importance of oil to realize what could be at stake.

8. The energy resources in the Arctic, amounting to a quarter of untapped global stocks, are also relevant with respect to the new security dimensions created by climate change. The placing of the Russian flag on the ocean bed by a submarine expedition last year was a sign that a new security era has dawned in the Arctic. Access to the region's energy resources could be a strategic advantage in the 21st century global economy.
9. The opening of new sea routes caused by the melting of the Arctic ice, both the Northern Sea Route and the Bering Sea Route, not only shortens the ocean trade routes from Asia to Europe and America in a revolutionary way but also requires systematic arrangements and formal agreements involving Russia, the United States, Canada and the Nordic countries. These sea routes could become as important for global trade in the 21st century as the Suez and Panama Canals were in their times – and those canals gave rise to serious tensions and military conflicts. It is clear that control over the new sea routes which climate change opens up in the Arctic will confer enormous power and wealth on those countries that find themselves in key geographical positions.
10. Humanitarian crises caused by extreme weather events will become more frequent and more dramatic, creating societal and cross-boarder stresses with the potential for multiple security implications. Many such crises occurring simultaneously would severely test the capacity of the existing international institutions. The global demand for relief action could put the Security Council and other UN bodies into a more challenging crisis than they have ever envisioned.

The ten areas of new security concerns caused by climate change which I have here briefly outlined support the view expressed at the Bali Conference: that combating climate change would be the central peace challenge of the 21st century. It is therefore of utmost importance to marshal our forces, both nationally and internationally, in order to prevent disastrous global warming since the consequences of failure could aggravate old tensions and trigger new ones all over the world, spilling over into violence, wars and military threats. Countries in Europe, Asia,

Africa and both the Americas will be affected. No one will be immune from these threats to the permanent security of our nations.

Within one or two decades, the dramatic transformations which I have just outlined could already dominate the international agenda. Time is therefore not on our side. Metaphorically speaking, it is already close to midnight. Even now the evidence indicates that the warming of the planet and the melting of the ice has taken place more quickly than was previously predicted.

We must seek guidance from the heritage which grew out of earlier global crises and model our actions with respect to the frameworks already in existence, on the treaties and institutions, both regional and global, which provide the pillars of the existing international community.

Dialogue on how this should be done, how to proceed from analysis to preventive action, how to extend and develop our international security framework, is now a clear priority.

We must use the next few years to build consensus and agreements on necessary measures, otherwise the consequences of climate change could become more tragic than we ever imagined, even causing upheavals in the global institutional framework that was created after the Second World War.

We were able to contain the Cold War by a series of treaties which at first seemed unattainable. We witnessed the building of a new democratic and free Europe within a single decade, transforming global politics from deadly confrontation to a more interconnected world.

We were able to land a man on the moon and gain extensive knowledge of its landscape but have now to face the startling fact that we know less about the Earth's oceans than the lunar desert.

The Law of the Sea was created a few decades ago after a prolonged period of negotiation. It was a monumental achievement, regulating what before had been open to conflicts and confrontation. Its wisdom is now being acknowledged even by those who earlier were reluctant to sign on. It can be both a model and an inspiration for the task ahead.

For my country, the Law of the Sea was a triumphant proof that military confrontation and conflicts over economic zones could be replaced by a legal and systematic approach to solving problems between nations. It guaranteed the security of our waters while enabling the nation to harness its ocean resources. It was an innovative and brilliant framework created by a constructive cooperation between scientists and

experts, legal minds and policymakers, political leaders and international authorities.

We now need a similar call to action, a visionary collaboration between brilliant minds accompanied by an invitation to all concerned citizens to become involved, to be heard and counted.

As we face potentially the greatest security challenge of the 21st century we must not allow ourselves to fail in this endeavour. If we do so our children and grandchildren will have every right to blame us.