



**SMALL STATES - EMERGING POWER?  
THE LARGER ROLE OF SMALLER STATES IN THE  
21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

**Opening Address  
by  
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Tomorrow we celebrate the establishment of the Republic, achieved after almost seven centuries of foreign rule. A nation formed by free-spirited men and women, who journeyed across a dangerous ocean to set up home on this Northern island, finally acquired the right to determine its future.

Our independence campaign lasted one hundred years, but no blood was spilled, no one was killed or imprisoned. It was conducted entirely by democratic means through debates, public assemblies, newspapers and periodicals — through a culture of peace which has become our legacy and our vision.

We are proud to be one of 24 countries in the United Nations without any armed forces and fortunately this group is constantly becoming larger; many find the number surprisingly high. This demonstrates that it is possible to achieve peace and security without military strength. These 24 countries, all of them small, are thus highly relevant to the subject matter of our meeting.

The celebrations when our Republic was proclaimed in the heavy rain at Thingvellir in 1944 were a manifestation of national unity, symbolizing peace and a positive spirit, but our struggle was by no means over. We were still among the poorest countries in Europe, a nation of farmers and fishermen who had to work hard to provide their homes with sufficient food for survival.

For a small country to be fully independent, it must control its resources. For us, this involved the management of the rich ocean surrounding the island and also made it necessary to search for new ways to produce sufficient energy. The fertile fishing grounds had been exploited by large fleets of foreign trawlers but if Iceland was to become economically independent as well as politically sovereign, those resources had to be harnessed in a sustainable way, securing a long-term benefit for the nation.

Thus, against heavy international odds, a small country set itself the task of reforming global law regarding the ocean by unilaterally extending its fishing limits, first to 12 miles, then to 50 and finally to 200 miles, and simultaneously playing an enlightened role in international negotiations which cumulated in the creation of the Law of the Sea, a legal framework benefiting all nations, large and small; a legal framework which the United States is now discovering is essential if the governing of the rich energy resources of the Arctic ocean is to be successful.

Under the banner of law, and with a vision of a just international order, Iceland succeeded in claiming the right to its ocean resources and drove away the fleets of powerful countries, thus helping to lay the foundation of a comprehensive international rule of law.

A small state had taken the initiative and led by example. As a result, at the end of the negotiation process, every country had acquired the right to a 200-mile exclusive economic zone. Coastal states and island nations could claim victory and their position in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was significantly strengthened. They have become an influential bloc within the United Nations; a strong moral force in the light of emerging climate change and rising sea levels.

How Iceland hosted the Nixon–Pompidou Summit in 1973, and later the meeting between Reagan and Gorbachev, is also an indication of how a small country can become a suitable venue for historic events, and Iceland's leadership in the recognition of the sovereignty and independence of the Baltic States also shows that a small state can strongly influence the course

of world transformation.

Another example of a small state breaking the ice on important global matters was the role played by the enlightened leaders of Trinidad and Tobago in the campaign for the establishment of an international criminal court. Their vision was subsequently supported by numerous civic organizations throughout the complicated negotiations which led to the creation of this vital institution. Now those who are accused of genocide and crimes against humanity, war criminals who can not be tried in their own countries, are put on trial in the Hague. Thus, what in the early 1990s was an idealistic vision on the part of the leaders of a small Caribbean island has now become a significant instrument of international justice.

We can also list the work of the Maldives and other small island states in drawing attention to the threat of climate change as a security challenge long before that debate reached the centre of the global agenda. They realized that their survival was at peril and consequently worked successfully to rouse the rest of the world.

Last month we witnessed an outstanding example of how a small state can succeed in bringing peace and stability to a suffering region when Qatar led the negotiations which brought the factions and the forces in Lebanon to an agreement and paved the way for the election of a new president and the creation of a harmonious government. Where some of the most powerful countries on earth had failed, small Qatar succeeded due to the enlightenment, sophistication and the knowledge of the Amir and other Qatari leaders, but also due to the fundamental character of its position. Small Qatar has found it natural to maintain friendly relations with everyone.

These examples which I have briefly mentioned here today, and also many others, prove that size does not matter. Ideas, vision, the courage to make new proposals - these are the things that provide the key to success. Small states which cultivate these skills and make their voice heard, can have a significant influence on international affairs, either on their own or in concert.

If leadership on international security and progress were left only to powerful states and their alliances, many of the key issues facing mankind in the coming years would not receive sufficient attention. That is why small states, individually and collectively, should make international peace and security and economic and social progress their active concern.

Sometimes when I listen to debates on global affairs or read opinions and analyses by some of the most influential academics, pundits or political leaders of our times, it is clear that many have not yet realized the fundamental global shift which has taken place in recent decades. They are still stuck in the rhetoric of big power politics, influenced by the old framework of a globe divided between dominant blocs; they have not fully comprehended the diversified, complex and challenging dynamics of an international community created by nearly 200 sovereign nations, almost a quarter of which are significantly small.

When Iceland became independent and joined the United Nations, we were almost the only small state among the 50 or so members. Now, small and medium-sized countries have become a powerful influence. Global developments and modern technology and transformations have enabled them to achieve unprecedented success.

Traditional thinking in academia, the media and some political quarters has been dominated to such an extent by old thought-patterns, by a framework built on theories from previous centuries, that the fundamental change which by the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century had altered the global scene is often ignored, especially as regards how smaller states can now utilize new opportunities to exert a significant influence on the content of global progress, helping to create international agreements and conclude important treaties.

In the last century, heavy industry, oil resources and manufacturing generated great economic wealth. That was the era of large and powerful nations which employed mass production as the means to advancement. Information technology and globalization have dramatically altered this situation. Innovations can now emerge from any corner, anybody with new ideas has the chance to establish a global presence.

Former obstacles to the influence of small states have largely been abolished and replaced by a wide and open field where talents, imagination, creativity, determination, vision and the willingness to formulate new proposals are of crucial importance, and not how powerful the players are or the physical resources at their disposal.

In many ways, a small country is well placed to be a creative political laboratory, a fertile ground for initiatives, a bearer of new ideas, an initiator of new thinking.

While small states certainly need to tackle a variety of problems, they also have many important assets. Their contribution towards the evolution of democracy is significant, since the close contact and transparency engendered by smallness can enrich the democratic way of life.

It is interesting to note that, in antiquity, the cradle of western democracy was Athens and Rome, which in those days were small states by modern standards with a population similar to that of Iceland today. The writings of Plato and Aristotle, the speeches of Caesar and Cato were all influenced and inspired by their experience of politics in small states. Their contributions have largely influenced the political heritage which still moulds the western intellectual tradition.

History shows that small states can serve as creative forums for democracy, law and legal order, as models for civilized society and transparent government. They have the great advantage of being a threat to no one. There is no risk involved in engaging them in a broad cooperation. They have no hidden agenda and cannot deploy military might, financial power or strong political pressure to achieve their aims. They act straightforwardly. There are no problems involved in being their friends.

Such qualities are genuinely valuable at a time when complex relations, fears and even terror underlie the coexistence of nations. Many doors that remain closed to others are open to small nations. Larger countries often seek the assistance and contributions of small states because they know that these states will never become a threat to their partners. Such qualities are an important asset. We are increasingly witnessing that it is an advantage to be small, to be able to have everyone as a friend.

It was with reference to these characteristics and the increasing number of small states, both in Europe and other parts of the world, and because of the intellectually fascinating analysis of achievements by small states, that it was decided in Iceland a few years ago to establish a Centre for Small State Studies, based in the University of Iceland but linked to the Foreign Ministry and to the business community. The centre is constructed in such a way as to be both international in membership and geared towards cooperation with other small countries.

Not only in Europe, but also in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, the Caribbean and the Middle East, small states now form a significant part of the political and economic mosaic. They are increasingly playing significant roles within global and regional institutions, UN agencies, the IMF and the

World Bank. Through their election to the Security Council, they have become, in the company of the major powers, crucial players when issues of peace and security are decided.

In the light of this significant emergence of small states on the global stage, it is remarkable that their special role, their contributions, the hindrances and opportunities which characterize their involvement, their advantages and limitations, their uniqueness and common features have not been explored and examined in a way worthy of such a significant transformation of the international order.

The establishment of the Centre for Small State Studies here in Iceland demonstrated our determination to create a broad international forum where scholars and researchers, officials and political leaders, entrepreneurs and opinion-makers, could come together and examine the role of small states in the modern world, gain new knowledge and insights, discuss how to make small states more effective players on the global stage, enhancing their influence, improving their performance, strengthening their economies and providing their citizens with a better life.

Certainly, many small states face a great variety of problems, some of them even posing a threat to their very existence. For some, consolidation of their sovereignty and their security in the face of armed threats, crime and the lack of civil order are still the priority agenda. Environmental disasters, rising sea levels, deforestation and desertification are the preoccupation of others.

But small states have also demonstrated how they can significantly strengthen democracy and human rights, international engagements and political creativity. This has been shown, for example, by Trinidad and Tobago in the campaign for the International Criminal Court, by the Baltic States in the break-up of the Soviet Union and the establishment of democracy in Eastern Europe, by Iceland in the evolution of the Law of the Sea in the 1970s, by the Maldives in raising awareness of climate change and by Qatar last month in negotiating peace and cooperation among the factions and forces in Lebanon.

The contributions made by small states towards reforming the international community and making the world more civilized are certainly far out of proportion to their small populations. The explanation lies partly in their flexibility, in their ability to act and initiate when others are silent and passive, in their freedom to engage in operations which would be

unthinkable if larger countries were involved because those countries often have complex interests and huge bureaucracies which at times render them unable to act quickly on urgent matters.

In order to utilize these fascinating opportunities which the 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought us, we must develop greater cooperation between small nations. Through the establishment of the Centre for Small State Studies and in dialogues which I, together with the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and other Ministers, have had in the last twelve months or so with many leaders all over the world as part of our campaign for a seat on the Security Council, Iceland has invited others to join us in such a cooperation.

The conference here today is thus a manifestation of our vision and I am both pleased and honoured to participate in your deliberations.