



SMALL STATES – EMERGING POWERS

**A Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at an International Seminar on the
Role of Small States
in International Peace and Security**

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Your Excellencies,
Distinguished guests.

While the West was preoccupied by the Cold War, the nuclear arms race and the challenge presented by the Soviet Union and its allies, a fundamental transformation of the global community was taking place.

Traditional thinking in academia, the media and some political circles has been dominated to such an extent by old thought-patterns, by a framework built on theories from previous centuries, that the fundamental changes which by the dawn of the 21st century had altered the global scene are often ignored, especially the way in which smaller states can now utilize new opportunities to exert a significant influence on the

content of global progress – economic, social and democratic – and help to create international agreements and conclude important treaties.

Former obstacles to the influence of small states have largely been removed and replaced by a wide and open field where talent, imagination, creativity, determination, vision and the willingness to formulate new initiatives are of crucial importance. In this context the physical resources of a country are no longer a decisive factor. A small country is now well placed to be a creative laboratory, a fertile ground for constructive ideas.

While small nations certainly need to tackle a variety of problems, they also have many important assets. In the current global financial hurricane, Iceland and others have been reminded, to use an analogy, that when a hurricane passes over the ocean towards powerful mainlands it usually first crosses small islands where the destruction can be substantial, however experience also shows that small states, due to their flexibility and the closely knit networks of cooperation which characterize their societies can recover surprisingly quickly. In their present situation, the Icelanders are fortunately aware that despite the current financial challenges our long-term resources are fundamentally strong, the enormous wealth in the potential for clean energy production, both geothermal and hydro, the strong fish stocks, the large reservoirs of fresh drinking water, which is in increasing demand over the world, plus the beautiful natural wilderness, valleys and rivers, which every year attract an increasing number of tourists.

Examining the evolution of democracy, it is interesting to note the significant contribution by small states, enhanced by the close contact and transparency fostered by smallness which has enriched the development of civil society.

It is interesting to note that, in antiquity, the cradle of western

democracy was in 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 Cicero and Cato, the political heritage which still moulds the western intellectual tradition, were influenced and inspired by the experience of politics in small states.

In today's world, small states have the great advantage of being a threat to no one. Many doors which remain closed to others are for them wide open. They have no hidden agenda; cannot deploy military might, financial power or strong political pressure to achieve their aims. Consequently there are no problems involved in being their friend, engaging them in a broad cooperation.

Such qualities are genuinely valuable at a time when complex relations, fear and even terror underlie the coexistence of nations.

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 fundamental transformation of the international order.

The manner in which Iceland hosted the Nixon–Pompidou meeting in 1973, and in 1986 the historic summit between Reagan and Gorbachev, is an indication of how a small country can also become a suitable venue for dialogue of international consequence. Furthermore, Iceland’s leadership in the recognition of the sovereignty and independence of the Baltic States shows that a small state can significantly 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 cannot 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 remarkable instrument of international justice.

Last May we witnessed another 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 which paved the way for the election of a new president and the creation of a harmonious government. Where some of the most powerful countries in the world had failed, small Qatar succeeded.

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 became the focal point of the global

agenda. Their survival was at peril and therefore they strove intensely and, as it turned out, successfully to rouse the rest of the world.

My country can in many ways be described as a theatre of the evolving climate change process, the nation witnessing the alarming rate of melting of our glaciers, which are the largest in Europe. The pace of retreat is so striking that mountains and valleys which have been covered by ice for centuries have now become clearly visible. But not only do we have the largest glaciers in Europe, we also struggle with the largest desert in Europe, fighting it for a century with systematic scientific projects in soil preservation and soil reclamation, producing lessons and experience which have now become increasingly relevant for nations in Africa and Asia, and even for the United States, where Arizona is a frontier that reminds us how global warming is enlarging the deserts.

Furthermore, the people of Iceland are highly aware of how the Gulf Stream, which encircles our island, a gift delivered continuously to the North Atlantic from the Gulf of Mexico, joins the water produced by the melting of the Arctic and the Greenland ice sheet and thus creates what can best be described as the motor which drives the entire global conveyor belt of ocean currents, influencing the climate in Asia, Africa and the Americas.

On the positive side, Iceland can also serve as an inspiration, as an example of how to battle climate change through comprehensive transformation of energy systems. In the early years of my life, over 80% of Iceland's energy needs were met by using coal and oil. My daily duty in the fishing village where I grew up was to carry the coal and check the oil so we could cook our meals and warm our dwellings. We knew no energy sources except fossil fuel.

Now, 100% of Iceland's electricity is produced from clean energy resources, geothermal and hydro, and over 75% of our total energy consumption, including fuel for cars and shipping, is derived from the same clean resources. Within the lifetime of one generation, we have transformed Iceland from being predominantly a fossil-fuel user into a world leader in the production and consumption of clean energy, making us an uncontested champion of sustainable energy.

The fight against irreversible climate change is fundamentally about the future of energy. If the Icelandic model were followed on a global scale by utilizing the variety of clean energy resources available to every country, global warming could clearly be slowed down or even averted.

It has consequently become a fundamental part of my mission to spread this simple truth, to build bridges and networks so other nations can be inspired by our example.

In recent years we have created clean energy projects in California and China, in East Africa, Western Europe, Central America and Asia. The know-how and the technology created over previous decades in my small country has now become the basis of clean energy projects in different parts of the world, a fundamental proof that even the smallest of nations can provide leadership in solving the greatest challenge of our times.

History shows that the contributions made by small states towards reforming the international community and making the world more civilized are certainly far out of proportion to the size of their 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.

I hope that your deliberations and discussions here today will reflect these fundamental, global changes, changes which can enhance opportunities of smaller states to play an even greater, constructive role within the United Nations.