



The Stephen A. Ogden Memorial Lecture
on International Affairs

by

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THE NORTHERN REGIONS:
A NEW DIMENSION
IN
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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President of the University
Distinguished professors
Students and honoured guests

It was with profound gratitude and pleasure that I accepted the invitation to be with you here today and show my support for the strengthening of the cultural bonds between the United States and my own country Iceland, the Baltic States and the other Nordic countries.

The music and the text which we listened to remind us that the links between the American continent and Iceland are 1000 years old. The ancient medieval Icelandic Sagas describe the journeys of Leifur Eiríksson – Leif the Lucky – and the remarkable Icelandic woman discoverer Guðríður Thorbjarnardóttir across the ocean to the uncharted fjords and valleys of this continent.

Admittedly it is a contradiction to deliver a lecture on the Northern Regions as a new dimension in international relations when splendid artists have reminded us how the northern sea routes, the journeys across the Atlantic, the discovery of new lands and virgin territories, were indeed the driving force behind what was the most democratic civilization in all of Europe in its day, when the millennium which now is coming to a close was still emerging on the horizon.

The democratic commonwealth in Iceland was founded in 930 by the establishment of the Althingi, which therefore is now the oldest parliament in the world, and was given a meeting place in the beautiful rift valley Thingvellir – and what a coincidence it was that Thingvellir, the old home of Iceland's parliament, is in geological terms the unique meeting place between the American and the European continents, where the two continental plates lie so close together that one can literally walk from the American continent to the European continent in less than an hour. So if the parliamentary speeches in the Althingi more than a 1000 years ago grew rather boring, you could take a break with a brief walk to Europe and return on foot to America in time for the voting.

Yes, the Northern Regions were indeed a pioneering part of Europe and the world a thousand years ago, created new democratic institutions, accepted Christianity and gave it an added humanistic dimension under the influence of the ancient Edda poems and other works of wisdom and culture. The Northern people journeyed not only across all of Europe and as far south as Turkey, the coast of Africa and the Canary Islands, but they also travelled deep into Russia and Ukraine and across the Atlantic Ocean to Greenland and subsequently to what is now Canada and the United States.

The Icelanders and our Nordic relatives were, at the turn of the last millennium, perhaps the most discovery- and exploration-driven communities in all of Europe. A few centuries later Icelandic scholars and writers gave the accounts of these endeavours an eternal form by writing them down on calfskin, thus creating literary manuscripts unique in all of medieval Europe.

I mention these ancient roots of my nation and our relations, not just in order to remind you and our southern European friends that it took Christopher Columbus 500 years to catch up with us – although admittedly he benefited from a better public relations system than the Viking discoverers – but I bring this history to our attention here today because it is important to bear in mind, when looking at the new dimensions created by the evolution of the Northern Regions, how deeply rooted our relationship and joint history really are.

My nation has for centuries been inspired by the wisdom that truths woven into cultural heritage provide valuable insights when attempting to analyse what the present means for the future.

During the 20th century and even the centuries proceeding it the centre of action was, however, the European continent; where two world wars paralysed the entire world; where the cruel regimes of fascism, Nazism and communism imprisoned and killed millions of people and created suffering and tragic losses beyond anything hitherto known to mankind; where the battleground of the Cold War was marked by strategic arsenals, missiles and nuclear warheads; where the evolution towards new economic structures and cooperation began; and where the

end of the Cold War brought down the Iron Curtain and Berlin Wall and made many nations finally democratic and free.

It was inevitable that during this dramatic historical period the Northern Regions should somehow be forgotten. Their place could perhaps best be seen on the old maps that hung in our classrooms when we were young. On those maps the continent was clearly the heart of Europe and Britain just somehow managed to be in its proper place but the Nordic countries and other parts of the Northern Regions almost disappeared at the top, too inconsequential to be given any serious attention.

The term Northern Regions embraces not only the Nordic countries – Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland as well as the Faroe Islands and Greenland – but also the newly independent Baltic States and the north-western territories of Russia and the eastern provinces of Canada. I am also aware of the growing interest shown by the US in taking part in the evolution of the Northern Regions, so extensively defined, while at the same time taking care of American interests in and relations to other parts of the world.

Up to the decade which is now coming to a close there was very little interest in the development of the affairs of the Northern Regions; they were primarily considered to be a status quo part of the world. The deep frost of the Cold War somehow harmonized with the colder climate up north, so the end result was as uneventful as the never-ending wilderness of snow and ice where monotonous whiteness covered everything in all directions to the horizon.

But just as the Summit Meeting of President Reagan and Secretary General Gorbachev in Höfði House in Reykjavík in the autumn of 1986 began the transformation of the entire world, and heralded the dawn of the new times which replaced the darkness of the Cold War, so the Northern Regions have experienced vibrant changes, similar to the arrival of spring which breaks the ice covering lakes and rivers; and suddenly there is movement everywhere and the newly released streams move forward with force and vigour.

In less than ten years the Northern Regions have seen the emergence of new states and new regional associations, new political structures dealing with fundamental economic and environmental challenges, bringing both Russia and the United States into dynamic and positive reform efforts led by a close association of the five Nordic States and the three Baltic States, with those eight small states becoming the core of the process of change in the Northern Regions.

Let me describe briefly each of the elements characterizing the evolution of the Northern Regions and how they are providing new and interesting dimensions in international relations.

First: New states. The independence that the Baltic States gained, when their democratic movements succeeded in breaking the chains which the Soviet Union had created, brought those three small states out of the territories of the Soviet Union and into the family of sovereign and free Northern European countries. The Nordic countries, especially Iceland and Denmark, played a significant role in supporting the Baltic fight for independence and democracy, and Iceland was the first country to recognise their sovereignty and established diplomatic relations with the Baltic States. At that time the more powerful partners in the North Atlantic Alliance, especially the United States and Germany, wanted to wait and justified that policy by stating that Gorbachev must be given a chance. Ever since, the Baltic States have praised the role played by Iceland and the other Nordic countries, a role which shows how important contributions small Northern European states can make to the international evolution.

Second: The active cooperation between the eight small Northern European states. With the independence of the three Baltic States the possibility arose to extend the traditional and strong cooperation between the five Nordic states to our Baltic friends and thus create an active relationship between eight states in Northern Europe: a bloc which potentially could have significant influence, both because of these nations' close cooperation and mutual trust and also because they overlap in a mosaic of alliances, some in NATO, some in the European Union, all in the new regional councils created in the last ten years.

Thus these eight states are now in the process of creating many active forms of cooperation – economic, social, cultural and political – as well as coordinating their dialogue on their relationship with Russia, the European Union and other important aspects of the evolution of Europe in the 21st century, especially in the fields of security and economic cooperation.

Iceland and the other Nordic members of NATO supported from the outset the application by the Baltic States to join NATO, and all eight countries strongly advocated the Finnish proposal that the European Union should formally establish the so-called “Northern Dimension” in its strategy for the 21st century. It is also significant that only a few weeks ago the five Nordic countries jointly opened new embassies in Berlin, the reinstated capital of the most powerful country on the European continent, embassies which are interlinked in their construction, thus creating a unified complex to signify a joint Nordic presence in the new Germany, instead of the old arrangement of having separate national representations.

Third: The creation of three regional councils – the Council of Baltic Sea States, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Arctic Council – in this decade demonstrates how the end of the Cold War has transformed relationships among the states in the Northern Regions and consequently brought Russia and the United States into a new form of active cooperation with the five Nordic States and the three Baltic States.

Although all these three councils are all different in membership and in the composition of their agenda and aims, they form together a new network of inter-linked regional councils ranging from Russia, across the Baltic and the Nordic States, over the Atlantic to Canada and the United States. In all of these councils the five Nordic States form the key component.

In the first half of this decade many people doubted the relevance of these new regional councils but in the last few years their strength has grown from one year to the next. The member states are all now sharing an active interest in their evolution. Russia and the United States, together with the European Union, have realised that these new regional councils offer unique opportunities for integration and problem-solving in the

Northern Regions. They also provide positive ways of integrating Russia successfully into cooperation with a significant number of western countries, perhaps because these regional efforts were created and led by the Nordic countries and inspired by our successful tradition of integrated cooperation, thus keeping the style of the old superpower tension away from the evolution of these new regional bodies.

Fourth: New challenges call for active cooperation, especially in order to preserve the environment and prevent climate change and nuclear catastrophes. The Arctic area, the Barents Sea region and substantial parts of Northern Europe, including Greenland, are potentially highly significant for the entire global environmental system in the event of further climatic change. The motor driving the world's network of ocean currents which provide the foundation for the global weather system lies around Iceland and its essential mechanism is the combination of warm ocean water generated by the Gulf Stream and the cold ocean water created by the melting of the Arctic and Northern icecaps. Excessive melting of the ice could stop the combination which drives the motor of the ocean currents and the entire global weather system would suffer disastrous effects as a consequence.

In addition the environmental relevance of the Northern Regions is enhanced by the presence of vast nuclear arsenals, submarines and military systems, especially in the north-western part of Russia, some in a very bad shape as far as safety is concerned. Sustained international cooperation is therefore needed to maintain the safety of these weapon systems and nuclear installations in order to prevent global disasters. Furthermore, the biological systems in the Northern Regions – the plants, the vegetation, the fishing stocks – are among the most important global resources and without intensive cooperation there is a significant danger of their extinction.

Fifth: The federal structures of Russia, Canada and the United States have brought regional, provincial and state governments into significant cooperation with the smaller nation states in the Northern Regions. Thus an interesting form of regional and nation state cooperation in economic, social and political affairs is being created. New entities have entered the framework of cooperation in the Northern Regions and in many ways the area can now be seen as a laboratory situation of how the old nation states

and the regional, provincial and state governments within the federal structures will evolve intensive forms of international cooperation in the 21st century and thus transform the old traditional model of diplomatic exchange.

These structural innovations are further enhanced by the growing independence of both the Faroe Islands and Greenland, which although formally parts of the Danish state are increasingly taking more power into their own hands and dealing independently with their neighbouring countries, for example Iceland and Canada. In addition it will be interesting to witness how Scotland, which for the first time in more than three hundred years now has its own parliament and its own regional government, will develop its cooperation with neighbouring countries and regions in Northern Europe and Canada.

Sixth: The foreign policies of the US, Canada, Russia and the European Union have in recent times acknowledged these new realities in the Northern Regions and their importance for the evolution of Europe and the Atlantic relationship in the 21st century. Thus the European Union has formally accepted the so-called “Northern Dimension” as a pillar in its policy framework for the 21st century. Canada is formally deciding on a new northern policy. The US State Department has sought active participation in the new regional councils and Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbott has particularly been very active in this area. The Russian Foreign Ministry has similarly paid increasing attention to these regional institutions and emphasised the need to successfully solve fishing disputes with neighbouring countries. Whereas the Northern Regions ranked fairly low on the priority scale of the US, Russia and the European Union some years ago, we have in recent years witnessed a significant change which indicates a new set of priorities for the 21st century.

When all these six elements are taken together they demonstrate how the end of the Cold War has dramatically transformed the political and economic landscape in the Northern Regions and brought them into key positions, and will influence strongly the success and stability of the new Europe and the Russian-United States relationship.

Countries in Northern Europe have now created significant opportunities for cooperation, both among themselves and also with Russia, the United States and the European Union, cooperation endowed with regional, national and global dimensions.

The integration of the communities in these regions can further harmonious relationships between large and small European states, between non-EU and EU member states and between non-NATO and NATO member states.

The development of economic, scientific and cultural cooperation in the Northern Regions and the integration of investments in energy projects and communication systems can further enhance the regions' contribution towards a better understanding of such fundamental global problems as climate change and ocean depletion, and thereby further efforts by global institutions to deal with these fundamental threats to our civilisation and biosystems.

The cooperation and dialogue between Russia and the United States within the institutionalised frameworks of the new regional councils can enable these two important states to develop new and positive ways of harmonising their relationships as well as actively participating in the evolution of the Northern Regions which significantly affects the environmental future of planet Earth.

The significance of the Northern Regions is so critical for the Earth's biosystem as to make intensified cooperation between all states and sub-regions in our part of the world both a moral duty and an obligation to fellow members of the human race.

The oceans which link the Atlantic, the Barents and the Arctic regions are not only of great importance for the livelihood of our people but also play a key role in the global weather system. Therefore increased ocean research must be a major part of our future cooperation. The opening of the Northern Sea Route could in addition fundamentally transform opportunities for economic cooperation and trade with Asia. It would place the Northern Regions, especially the Barents-Euro-Arctic part, in a pivotal position in the global economy of the 21st century.

At the opening of my talk I referred to the great Northern explorers who a thousand years ago discovered new lands and crossed the vast ocean to discover new continents. They were moulded by the democratic spirit of the old Icelandic commonwealth and driven by a strong culture of discovery and exploration.

It is both an honour and a duty to be, in modern times, the bearers and guardians of this tradition of democracy and discovery. I hope that in meeting the challenges provided by the evolution of the Northern Regions we will all be worthy of the legacy of our ancestors who a thousand years ago made the North the most stimulating part of the European-Atlantic relationship.

The evolution of the Northern Regions in modern times has created fascinating challenges for the 21st century. It will be inspiring to see the positive results of our endeavours. May our future be blessed with the necessary wisdom and courage to journey successfully into the unknown.