

Arctic Frontiers – Arctic Tipping Points
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Icelandic Perspectives on the Arctic

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to have this opportunity to address the Fifth Arctic Frontier conference here in Tromsø. I sincerely thank the organizers for their kind invitation, and my Norwegian kinsmen for their strong contribution to Arctic sciences and to the well-being of the High North.

This is my first visit to the beautiful city of Tromsø. I'm not to blame for that, rather fate, and the governments of Iceland and the UK at the end of the last of our cod-wars. I spent long stretches of my early days as a very young fisherman on the Icelandic deep-sea trawlers, and when I decided to leave the sea for noble science of fisheries I contemplated going to Tromsø, where quite a few of us have studied. Instead, I was offered to do my Ph.D at the Fisheries Directorate in the United Kingdom, where I was presented as the token offering of Iceland to smoothen the diplomatic waves after the cod-war. So, I'm in Tromsø a bit later than intended, but like that heavenly creature, the polar bear, I am at home in the crisp, cold darkness of the Arctic winter so I can tell the good people of Tromsø that I do not particularly want to leave.

The title of this conference, *Arctic Tipping Points*, refers to the drastic changes which are occurring in the Arctic due to climate change, pointing at the same time to those anticipated, when the melting of the ice-cap opens up vast new areas for utilization, and possibly transport.

The Icelanders are no strangers to climate change and its effects on both society and nature. We have since settlement based our livelihood on the offerings of the Arctic nature, both on land and sea. The Arctic has had a very profound influence on the development and history of our country. Indeed, the settlement itself was made possible by a very brief spell of warm climate in the Arctic, when a completely untouched country was settled from Norway by what cynical historians sometimes refer to in jest as the first tax-evaders of history.

In the Sagas, and our annals of history, one of the most prominent factors always looming in the writers description is what our forebears with traditional literary flair inherited from the Celtic strain in our blood called the “mortal enemy”. This was the pack ice, with its grave consequences for the livelihood and survival of our people, extreme cold, frost damage to vegetation and the ensuing lack of crops, lack of vital access to the fish in the sea, - and of course hungry polar bears.

It is therefore not surprising that the high and the low points of our history are closely entwined with climatic and natural fluctuations. My grandparents’ generation witnessed the emigration of almost 25% of the Icelanders, who literally left their country because of the extreme climate that accompanied long spells of heavy pack ice.

The development of modern society in Iceland is also very much dependent on the nature of the Arctic North, and its fluctuations. The backbone of our economy has been, and still is, the exploitation of our fisheries resources. These, in turn, very much depend on the balance, and health of the Arctic nature. Iceland is surrounded to the East and to the West by strong polar currents flowing from the Arctic Ocean into the North Atlantic. The upswell on the boundaries of these currents, and the warmer Gulf Stream from the south is the basis of our strong fishing stocks. This, in fact, leads us to two conclusions of major importance for Iceland:

Firstly, changes in the climate that may alter the strength of these currents are likely to alter the distribution, even presence, of our fishing stocks, and thus may have fundamental effects on our economy. Indeed, we have in the course of history experienced dramatic fluctuations where fish stocks have migrated in and out of our coastal waters following variations in ocean temperature. These years, fx., the formerly strong stock of the Icelandic capelin is migrating out and up north, whilst that bone of contention, the mackerel, is migrating in.

Secondly, accidents, caused by exploitation of oil resources in the North, where the Polar currents are formed, might have very grave, physical repercussions for our marine resources. In this context, bear in mind that in the extreme cold of the North, the natural degradation of oil takes immensely longer than fx. in the Gulf of Mexico, and chemical catalysts normally used in such accidents are not of much use at very low temperatures.

Consequently, the geographical situation of Iceland in the effluent of the Arctic Ocean, therefore makes her very vulnerable to any sudden change in the marine ecosystem whether from climate change or pollution.

It therefore doesn't come as a surprise that the present government of Iceland has declared the Arctic as one of the main priorities of our foreign policy.

The detailed policy, that I presented to the Althingi, the Icelandic parliament, last week in the form of a resolution, can be distilled to broadly three lines of thought:

Firstly, the protection of our core interests as manifested in the form of healthy and thriving marine resources, biodiversity, clean seas, regulated traffic, secure environment.

Secondly, as a responsible stakeholder we want to be a party to decisions that affect the Arctic environment, and be able to contribute on equal

basis to cooperation on interests that we have in common with other nations in North.

Thirdly, we want to use our role as a responsible player in the Arctic theatre to bolster the strength of our arguments and to increase our voice in the relevant international fora to add still more weight to another major priority of our foreign policy, the global effort to halt climate change.

Allow me to outline some details of a few basic points in our policy.

Let's start by summing up the basic arguments that underscore our reliance on the Arctic North, and the vital interests we have in its good governance and well-being:

The waters surrounding Iceland are interlinked with the Arctic Ocean via currents and migrating fish stocks. Climate change in the region covering the Arctic Ocean clearly affects us, as everyone else in the region. Potential oil spills in the Arctic could have devastating effects on the immediate livelihood of Icelanders.

In essence, the Arctic is our home and its' development is inherently linked with our own fate as a nation state.

As a sovereign state, that is the only one lying in its entirety within what the government of our hosts defines as the High North, and with land and vast areas, as well as huge interests, within the Arctic, it is stating the obvious, that we consider ourselves an Arctic Coastal state. Understandably, we want to be recognized as such. In this context, the concept is not deployed in the narrow, legal sense confined to territorial claims. I use it as a political and geographical argument to drive home the point, not without reason, that we want to be included, not excluded, in deliberations on the Arctic region.

Another fundamental point in our policy is to support, and strengthen, the Arctic Council. We see it as a unique forum for regional cooperation, based on the special rights and responsibilities of the Arctic member states and the permanent participants, while allowing various stakeholders the democratic right to observe and contribute. We want to cooperate with other relevant states, and nations, to strengthen the Council, and give it a more assertive role. We would like to see the Arctic Council develop into the main forum, not only for discussions, but decisions on common – and I stress that word - Arctic issues. A splendid example of how important Arctic cooperation can be shaped, and indeed developed into legally binding agreements in various fields of common interests, is the upcoming agreement on Search and Rescue (SAR) in the Arctic which was finalized in Reykjavik last December. To make that happen, the Arctic Council needs to be strengthened, not undermined.

We are also aware of the fact, that with increased melting of the ice, growing pressure to utilize the resources within the Arctic, and with possible new routes from the Pacific to the North-Atlantic, there are bound to be disagreements, and disputes, on rights to resources, territory, or passage. We must possess well-oiled pathways and mechanisms to solve these. We believe such a tool indeed already exists, in the form of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Iceland, as an Arctic Coastal State, with vested interests in a peaceful and sustainable use of the Arctic marine environment, is committed to solving issues that pertain to the sea, on the basis of that unique Convention.

Another basic point of the policy of Iceland is a firm opposition against the re-militarization of the region. We live in a moment of history where there is relative quiet and calm in our part of the world. Territorial disputes are gradually being solved, as witnessed last September when Norway and Russia solved their disagreement in the Barents Sea, and solutions to other issues are in the making.

We also live in times, when old adversaries are increasingly recognizing their need to work together in mutually beneficial ways, in terms of

security as well as resource-utilization. The recent reflections of a Russian desire to work more closely with Nato, and, from our particular perspective, with countries such as Iceland, are very welcome. The Cold War is history, and in Iceland we look on Russia as a friendly neighbour and a natural ally on the Arctic scene.

Recent developments therefore create new possibilities to structure the Arctic into an example of peaceful cooperation on common interests, peace and security, devoid of the militarized tension that history shows often is the companion of unstructured competition for resources.

The climatic changes, and its increased access to the Arctic, will also put new responsibilities on the shoulders of the nations of the Arctic Council, with respect to civilian security and environmental surveillance. They will have to increase their efforts to monitor the environmental changes in the Arctic, and to increase surveillance to assist search and rescue to ensure civilian security when the melting of the ice-cap opens new areas for development of resources and possibly new routes of transport between continents. In this respect, I want to draw your attention to the splendid proposals in the recent report commissioned by the Nordic governments of a great friend of Iceland, and an old pillar of Norwegian politics, Thorvald Stoltenberg.

In his report, disarmingly simple and concise, Stoltenberg in a brilliant stroke proposes remote surveillance through a system of satellites, that combines both. This is an idea that Iceland wants the Arctic Council to embrace in future, and work with the Nordic countries to put into reality.

It is of importance to underscore as well, that our Arctic policy includes a firm commitment to support the rights of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Their existence today, and their future tomorrow, is based on the health of the Arctic environment. They have an ethical right to be a party to decisions of the region.

Finally, the European Union is an important partner in the Arctic due both to its reliance on Arctic resources, and its strong policy on climate change and the environment. As you will know, Iceland is presently engaged in accession negotiations with the EU. It is a bone of contention in Iceland. A lot of people want us to stop the negotiations but this morning there was a new opinion poll showing increased support in continuing the negotiations, with more than 65% of the nation saying: let's continue; so continue I will.

It is important to note that accession will not change our position when it comes to the geopolitics of the Arctic. To the contrary, it will strengthen our contribution to Arctic cooperation. The policy I have discussed here in Tromsø we shall contribute to the policy shaping of the EU on the Arctic, and upon assuming membership we shall be as active as possible in developing a solid and sensible direction for the Union on Arctic issues. Indeed, Iceland's accession will increase the need of the EU to take account of the Arctic and the North Atlantic region in its actions and policy.

To sum up the essence of our Arctic policy:

Firstly, Iceland aims to assert her position as a coastal state in the Arctic and is committed to ensuring that all international discussions and decisions about the future of our region reflect the interests and aspirations of Arctic residents.

Secondly, Iceland will actively encourage inclusive high level political cooperation within the Arctic Council with a strong focus on the human dimension.

Thirdly, in international fora Iceland will actively seek to ensure, that the interests and concerns of Arctic residents are put to the front in the global effort against climate change, transboundary pollutants and in developing agreements that will contribute to the sustainable development of the Arctic region.