

The Arctic Council – 20 years Anniversary

The Arctic Council in a Global Context - the Road Ahead

Norræna húsið, 9. september 2016

Panel discussion

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- Thank you chair for this introduction.
- I am pleased to be here this afternoon to discuss and exchange views on the importance of the Arctic Council, on the occasion of its 20th anniversary. I am also happy to see so many participants here today.
- Let me start by saying a few words on the developments in the Arctic region in the last 20 years.
- In 1996, the Arctic was not particularly high on the international agenda. The focus was exclusively on environmental protection and sustainable development, and even if this emphasis is still the backbone of the Arctic Council's work, the cooperation within the Council has – in the course of these 20 years – become much broader and deeper.
- In recent years, as a result of global warming, we have witnessed considerable changes in the Arctic, and these changes have been much more rapid than anticipated.

- Moreover, these changes are many-sided and affect our societies in numerous ways – economically, socially, environmentally, culturally, and in terms of security.
- We must also acknowledge that the changes in the Arctic can be viewed from various angles.
- While some maintain that they entail opportunities with regard to resource utilisation, shipping and tourism, others would underscore the challenges, or even threats, these changes represent.
- However, irrespective of which vantage point we choose, I believe it is now a common understanding that the development of the Arctic must be addressed through extensive cooperation.
- This includes, obviously, the eight Arctic States and the indigenous peoples, but also non-Arctic states, intergovernmental organisations, NGOs, the business sector and, last but not least, the academia and scholars.
- As an Arctic Coastal State and a founding member of the Arctic Council, Iceland has great interests at stake in the Arctic, shaped strongly by its geographical position and the importance of access to natural resources and their sustainability.

- Consequently, it comes as no surprise that developments in the Arctic have become a foreign policy priority for Iceland.
- Our ambition is to pursue our interests and only yesterday, in Akureyri, our Arctic capital, I myself, along with fellow ministers in the Committee of Ministers on Arctic Affairs introduced a report, which maps out Iceland's interests in the Arctic, which are manifold.
- But our ambition is also to maintain and foster the broad political consensus on the Arctic at home, and to further build on and develop the principles underpinning the national Arctic policy, unanimously approved in the Icelandic parliament, Althingi, in 2011.
- For Iceland, the Arctic Council is the most important forum for international cooperation on Arctic issues and we believe that this role needs to be enhanced.
- The Council now comprises the eight Arctic States and Permanent Representatives from six organisations of Arctic indigenous peoples, but in addition well over a dozen organisations and twelve non-Arctic countries have observer status in the Council, which clearly demonstrates increased international interest in the region.

- Since the Council was founded in 1996 it has served a role in promoting cooperation between countries in the Arctic region, especially in the field of environmental protection and sustainable development. And it has been quite successful in its efforts.
- However, in spite of the Council's many achievements, there are flashing warning lights.
- All around the world we witness the consequences of climate change but its impact is particularly revealing and drastic in the Arctic.
- Temperatures in the Arctic are increasing at more than twice the average global rate and the fragile ecosystem of the region is increasingly at risk.
- Arctic communities are experiencing first-hand the challenges of dealing with a rapidly changing climate and the consequences are far-reaching and have global consequences.
- These changing circumstances are likely to increase the Arctic Council's political weight.
- We see that the Council now addresses issues related to the environment and communities in the region, such as response to

environmental threats, navigation, search and rescue, cultural cooperation, health and the state of animal and plant species and marine cooperation.

- We, as Iceland, want to increase the Arctic Council's weight and relevance in decisions on the region, where necessary.
- The agreement on search and rescue, which extends to the whole Arctic region, was the first legally binding international agreement negotiated in the Arctic Council with full participation by all eight Arctic States.
- It served as a precedent for concluding further agreements in other areas, such as on oil spill prevention and we are now aiming at signing a third legally binding agreement – on scientific cooperation – at the next ministerial in 2017.
- These are good examples of the increased leverage of the Arctic Council and demonstrate that it has emerged as a political body that has influence and serves as a platform for debating key Arctic issues, as well as a forum for building consensus and forging new agreements.
- It is important that we continue to develop the cooperation between the Arctic States and with the Permanent Participants and the Observers further in this direction.

- Yes, security concerns in the region have recently become more salient and our challenge is, in the spirit of long-standing and fruitful Arctic cooperation, to find ways to manage those and maintain the Arctic as a region of stability and cooperation.
- In fact, in spite of tension and divergence in international politics, I believe the Arctic actually offers an opportunity for the states concerned to demonstrate that they are able to cooperate actively in a constructive manner.
- The Murmansk Initiative, launched by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987, and inspired by the Höfði Summit the year before, which 30 years we will be celebrating next month, was aimed at transforming the northern part of the globe from being a sensitive military theatre to becoming an international ‘zone of peace’, and contributed in a number of ways to decreasing tensions and confidence-building in the region.
- The Arctic region could still be seen as a venue for the Arctic states to set an example how responsible actors on the international arena should interact.
- This was the idea behind the Arctic Council when it was established 20 years ago and this is what we all should endeavour now and in the coming 20 years. Thank you.