

Keynote address by Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson,
Icelandic Minister for Foreign Affairs,
Iceland's Policy and Priorities in a Changing Arctic
Arctic Frontiers, 20. January 2014, Tromsø

Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the organizers of Arctic Frontiers for the invitation to speak here today. As a matter of fact, this is my second visit to Tromsø in only a few months. I was here last October for a Foreign Ministers' meeting in the Barents Euro- Arctic Council. And, given the dynamic and active role Tromsø plays here in the Arctic, I am pretty sure I will visit Tromsø again, sooner rather than later.

Iceland and Norway have a special connection. Not far from here in Leknes, Lofoten, is a monument, unveiled last year in memory of the first Norwegian settler that emigrated from Norway to Iceland in 945, Þuríður Sundafyllir. She was called Sundafyllir, which literally translates to have the ability of fill straits and inlets with fish, not a bad quality to have if you ask me and is probably part of the reason her name is known even today.

I mention this to make the point that much of our heritage, customs and traditions were once shared by Iceland and Norway. More than thousand years later, this common experience fosters mutual understanding and respect, an important asset to have both in Nordic and circumpolar context. Given our common geography and dependence on natural resources, it is by working together that we are able to go further and achieve more than we would otherwise. The region is interlinked and we are dependent on active cooperation between states, enterprises and not least the

people in the Arctic. Through close cooperation we ensure that future development is managed in a responsible way.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The driving force behind the changes in the Arctic is global warming and the receding ice sheet. These factors are the principal reason why the Arctic is opening up and new opportunities appear. In the past, focus on science and research was the cornerstone of Arctic cooperation. The Cold War also made sure that the defense and security aspects of the debate were kept out of the discussion. Now the situation is different. More open and transparent debate on security and defense is taking place. However, what is primarily driving the changes are the environmental factors and, with that, the possibility for increased economic activity in the Arctic. If you add to that technological advancements and greater experience of operations in the harsh Arctic conditions you are faced with a new and dynamic reality.

These changes are also the reason why many of the countries outside of the Arctic, and other stakeholders, are interested in developments in the Arctic and want at least to be prepared and informed about developments, possible changes, opportunities and future prospects.

As Arctic nations, we need to keep that in mind and make sure that our debate is open and transparent for others in the international and global community. This is happening as we speak; the Arctic Council now includes ten out of the eleven largest economies as members or as observers, six out of the fifteen largest oil producers and nine out of the twenty largest fishing nations in the world. Opening up of new sea routes and increased transport, both in volume and frequency, will of

course in the long run have implications for one of the most dynamic industry in the world, shipping and logistics.

Resource development is another industry that is increasingly looking towards the Arctic for the same reasons. Better technology and high prices on fossil fuels and many minerals make resource development, both in hydrocarbons and mining increasingly attractive. All projects in the Arctic should adhere to the highest standards when it comes to protecting the fragile environment and responsible resource management must be the cornerstone of our policies. To meet these challenges we must apply strict standards and make sure companies adhere to them.

At the same time we must not focus solely on fossil fuels. Take my country for example, where renewable energy is the principal source of power. We can do more in that area, increasing the part that renewable energy plays, is an important task when we discuss energy situation in the Arctic. Projects that produce renewable energy can be used to a much greater extent for local communities and towns in the Arctic climate. We have emphasized when it comes to our international cooperation to share this experience and expertise with other countries, not only in our region.

Here in Tromsø, where the offices of the permanent secretariat for the Arctic Council are located it is appropriate to discuss the role of the Arctic Council. The establishment of the secretariat was a major milestone and sets the tone for the future role of the Council. With the increasing interest in the Arctic, the role of the member states of the Arctic Council as well as the secretariat, will increase and expand. With this in mind, it is important that the member states ensure that the

Arctic Council Secretariat has the capability and the capacity to take on increased responsibility in the future.

Dear friends,

The Icelandic Government that took office last May has made the Arctic one of its main foreign policy priority. Iceland's Arctic policy is outlined in a parliamentary resolution from 2011, with twelve general policy guidelines. The Resolution serves as a guide for taking the Arctic policy forward and last October the government specified further eight measures that aim to expand and increase our commitment to the Arctic.

As one part of the eight measures we convened, last week, the first meeting of committee of ministers on Arctic affairs that will coordinate the implementation of our policies between the various ministries that are most heavily involved. This makes sure that the government as a whole is focused on how best to guide the way forward and implement the policy. In addition we formally opened our Consulate General in Nuuk in November and on that occasion signed a joint declaration with Greenland that will help us expand the relations between Greenland and Iceland. Iceland has now representations with our immediate neighbors in the North West Atlantic, Greenland and in the Faroe Islands which we opened in 2007.

We are studying the feasibility of establishing an international rescue and response hub in Iceland. Regional stakeholders need to jointly prepare for the security challenges that we are all faced with in the Arctic. Iceland's geographic location, search and rescue assets and strong infrastructure in various parts of the country, make it an interesting concept to pull together our capabilities. This will also serve

to increase situational awareness and help us get a clearer picture of the available infrastructure, in the vast area around Iceland.

There are opportunities in many areas for the business sector and one of the priorities of the Government is to promote enhanced cooperation with the business sector both in Iceland and on an international level. New opportunities open up and existing ones expand. At the same time we must always keep in mind that the people in the Arctic and local communities must be able to benefit from increased economic activities, while sustainability and sound management of resources remain of central importance.

We will review how our financial resources can be used more effectively to strengthen our political, as well as scientific engagement on the Arctic. In the multilateral context we will focus on gender equality, by launching a project within the Arctic Council, co-lead by Norway, to promote policy dialogue on gender equality issues in the region. Iceland will host an international conference on this important subject in Akureyri in October this year.

In addition it is worth mentioning that the Stefansson Arctic Institute in Akureyri is leading the second assessment of the Arctic Human Development report that builds and expands on the first one that was published in 2004, under the Icelandic chairmanship at the time.

In Iceland we see up close the environmental changes I mentioned before and how quickly they can emerge. The recent mackerel stock migration into the Icelandic exclusive economic zone is an example. Until just a few years ago there was no mackerel to speak of in Icelandic waters. Now the mackerel spends months in our

exclusive economic zone where it gains weight. A part of the stock even spawns in our waters. Experts agree that changes in the environment and increased temperatures in the ocean cause the mackerel to migrate further north in search of cooler waters. This has implications for Iceland, not all of them as positive as the mackerel. In the future we could see increased migration of commercially valuable species out of Icelandic waters north towards Greenland and Jan Mayen. These include cod, herring and capelin, all species that are and have been hugely important to our fishing industry and the export sector.

With increased focus on the Arctic, its future development and changes in various fields, there will be greater emphasis on the cooperation and coordination between the Arctic states and on the international arena. I mentioned in my speech at the UN General Assembly last September that these developments put special responsibility on us, the caretakers of the Arctic. That means the nations and people in the Arctic need to make sure that responsible resource management and sustainability are always kept in mind when discussing developments in the Arctic. Nations around the Arctic bear primary responsibility for their own back yard. We have today number of very good instruments and institutions to help us manage the Arctic in a responsible way, to mention a few: regional fisheries management organizations, the Arctic Council, number of regional organizations, the Barents Euro Arctic Council and United Nations instruments such as the Law of the Sea Convention to regulate and draw up boundaries of the Arctic seabed.

I am confident that these instruments and institutions are able to make sure that decisions about future developments in the Arctic are based on sound evidence and make sure the fragile environment in the Arctic is protected.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have touched up on some of the issues that are important, in particular the need for greater cooperation and collaboration because the Arctic is rapidly changing. This makes it important to maximize the use of existing structures and if necessary to seek new ways to cooperate.

We need to focus even more on strengthening our understanding of the changing realities in the Arctic. The Arctic Circle Assembly, which for the second time will meet in Reykjavík in early-September, is one more example of the increased demand for a broad international dialogue on these matters.

Dear friends,

For the nations in the Arctic the development and future of the area is of fundamental importance and will have major implications for the nations and people. Other nations need also to study the developments in the Arctic and what effects it might have on them and their future and we need to give the Arctic and its development the respect it deserves.

I hope you will have a fruitful discussion in the next few days on this very important topic here in Tromsø.