

**Second Annual Ambassadorial Panel on the Arctic High Seas,  
Pan Arctic Options and the Reykjavik University,  
Reykjavik 6 October 2016**

**Opening address**

**by H.E. Lilja Alfreðsdóttir, Minister for Foreign Affairs**

Former President of Iceland Mr Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson,  
Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to address you here today and to contribute to the deliberations you will be having afterwards amongst representatives from all the eight Arctic States and somewhat more distant non-Arctic States that have shown genuine interest in addressing responsibly emerging issues in the Arctic.

The more than 1500 participants that will gather here in Reykjavik over the week-end at the Arctic Circle Assembly demonstrate well the tremendous interest in the Arctic we find throughout the world community; policy-makers, scientists, local and indigenous peoples, students and representatives of NGOs and the business community will all meet here in Reykjavik to discuss the various aspects of the Arctic.

In 1996, when the Arctic Council was founded, the Arctic was not particularly high on the international agenda. The focus was exclusively on environmental protection and sustainable development. Today, however, 20 years later, the rapid changes in the region, entailing both opportunities and challenges, have translated into more

broader and deeper cooperation as, again, the Arctic Circle for the fourth time in a row so amply demonstrates.

We all 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, regardless from where we stand, I believe a common understanding has emerged that developments in the Arctic call for and 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, not least, 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. Therefore, developments in the Arctic is a foreign policy priority for Iceland and has a strong basis across the political spectrum in the Arctic policy that Althingi Parliament unanimously adopted in 2011.

For Iceland, and I suspect other Arctic countries as well, the Arctic Council is the main forum for cooperation on matters related to the Arctic. Over the course of 20 years, the Council has proved successful. It is not a full-fledged international organisation, but rather a coalition of states that have decided voluntarily to cooperate on matters of mutual interest despite tensions in different matters in

different parts of the world. In fact, in many respects, the Arctic Council provides a model for international cooperation and the Arctic has offered the states concerned to demonstrate that they are able to cooperate actively in a constructive manner.

Over the years Arctic Council has developed from a forum for discussions into a body that takes decisions and commits to legally binding agreements, including on search and rescue and the oil spill prevention and, currently the aim is to sign the third legally binding agreement on scientific cooperation in 2017.

However, in spite of the Council's many achievements, there are warning signals. All around the world we witness the consequences of climate change but its impact is particularly revealing and drastic in the Arctic. Temperatures are rising 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.

It is, therefore, highly relevant that we devote these morning hours to the Arctic ocean and the marine environment and let me thank the organisers of this symposium for their initiative.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In light of the rapid environmental changes that have already taken place and are likely to continue, it was most welcome that the

United States government decided to devote its efforts to Arctic marine cooperation during its 2015-2017 presidency in the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council Ministers decided to establish a Task Force under the co-chairmanship of the United States, Norway and Iceland, which is due to deliver its report in early 2017 on the future needs to strengthen marine cooperation and to make recommendations as to whether the Council should start negotiations on a cooperative mechanism for Arctic marine areas.

Iceland believes it is important to undertake this analysis and take actions to address the dramatic changes that we observe in the Arctic seas. The Task Force is developing options for cooperation mechanisms for the Arctic marine environment and will elaborate on a number of questions to be answered before proposing a working instrument. Those questions include knowledge inputs, coordination of efforts, area-based management measures, and relations with other international marine instruments.

There are certain guiding principles that the Task Force has agreed upon, including the recognition of the special role and responsibility of the Arctic States for marine stewardship in the Arctic region that should be practiced within the Arctic Council framework and in accordance with global legal instruments, such as the UN Law of the Sea Convention. Furthermore, it needs be conducted with the full involvement of Arctic indigenous peoples and complement rather than duplicate existing processes.

Iceland is willing to see some kind of strengthening of arctic marine cooperation and has made proposal to that effect, including establishment of a new subsidiary body under the Arctic Council. However, although time flies and changes are more dramatic than anyone could have imagined, patience is also important. Therefore, we need to conduct a thorough analysis and evaluate all possibilities before a decision is made, and gain full support among all states and stakeholders involved. In light of this, it looks as if the Task Force will propose a continuation of its work during the forthcoming Finnish chairmanship in the Arctic Council. Iceland would support that recommendation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last year, Icelandic authorities expressed their concern regarding a unilateral declaration of five states regarding prevention of unregulated commercial fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean. References to Coastal States and the exclusiveness of the five state declaration were not, in our view, in the right spirit of Arctic cooperation. Therefore, later on, Iceland welcomed the invitation to a ten-party consultations that the United States invited to in Washington DC in December 2015 to discuss and negotiate on precautionary measures in the Central Arctic Ocean.

As an Arctic Coastal State, Iceland is willing to be a part of a ten party declaration in the same spirit as the five State declaration of 2015. Iceland would also be able to support a legally binding agreement under the conditions that it would secure a stepwise process towards a fully-fledged Regional Fisheries Management Organisation, i.e. an agreement that would trigger in the foreseeable future structure that meets international standards and legal practises, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the 1995 UN Fish Stocks Agreement.

At the same time we stress the importance of precaution be exercised in the management and exploitation of fish stocks in the area, as elsewhere, based on best available scientific knowledge. It is important to maintain the balance between sustainable development and environmental protection. The balance needs to be maintained.

The negotiations on the high seas fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean are landmark negotiations. Never before have negotiations on fisheries taken place before the fish was actually there. This is „best practices“ in precautionary approach that we can be proud of.

We hope to see these negotiations concluded in the near future. The draft agreement envisages that states commit themselves to cooperation in scientific research. When science shows that the status of fish stocks justify fishing in some parts of the area, we should have in place one or more Regional Fisheries Management Organisation to address the necessary management and conservation steps to be taken.

I wish you a fruitful meeting. Thank you