

**“The Race for the North Pole”**  
***Icelandic and Nordic security policy in transition***  
**Delivered on 29 August 2007**  
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*The final text is the speech as delivered*

Members of the Conference:

It gave me great pleasure to accept your invitation to address the opening session of this seminar, which is held in connection with the start of the NATO - Partnership for Peace Exercise Northern Challenge 2007.

Iceland's national security and defence are now at a historic turning point. Until now, Iceland has been more or less a passive recipient in the defence co-operation of western states. For decades, the United States Defence Force assumed the role that independent sovereign states normally play themselves. In fact, the United States spoke for Iceland within NATO when it came to military matters, and in many ways they appeared in the role of Iceland's guardian. The United States' contribution to Iceland's defence was of course very important, but at the same time it had the effect of isolating us from our neighbouring countries.

That time is now behind us and a new period has begun in Iceland's security and defence.

Following the signature of an agreement with the United States providing for the departure of their armed forces from Iceland, efforts were begun under the leadership of the current Prime Minister to strengthen and increase our security and defence co-operation with other neighbouring countries. Discussions have been held with Norway, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Canada and Germany, to mention a few examples, and framework agreements have already been concluded with Norway and Denmark on defence co-operation. The task that lies ahead is to fill out these agreements and I have sensed great interest among our neighbours in the matter.

I have used the time since the new government was formed to prepare a thorough and well-grounded threat assessment for Iceland. We have had no such thorough assessment until now, and it is long overdue, as all plans for preparedness and capabilities are in my opinion deficient without such a foundation.

It is also clear that there need to be developed more democratic constitutional procedures than the ones that we have followed in matters relating to our national security, and we need to define more clearly the boundaries between issues which belong openly in the public sphere and matters which require confidentiality. It is important for both the limits and sources of authority to be clearly defined.

Generally speaking, the public discourse needs to be strengthened and unity and consensus must be achieved on basic principles. Such a consensus is generally in place in our neighbouring countries, and there is no reason for Icelanders to maintain the tradition of confrontation in our own assessment of defence and security. Defence is in the common interest of the nation, and it is important that such interests are not subject to political squalls on the home front, but based on a considered assessment of the threats confronting the nation at any given time. We must work to achieve a consensus.

A defence and security forum for consultation among the political parties will be set up, and it is also necessary to establish a strong and well defined research institution in this field which would participate actively in international academic co-operation.

It is necessary to draw a clear line between internal security in the Icelandic society and the external security and Iceland's co-operation with other countries in that regard. And this will require good co-operation between the ministries and government agencies under new circumstances.

As a fully fledged member state of NATO, Iceland must shoulder new responsibilities. It is the assessment of NATO, for example, that Iceland's air defence system, which the United States discontinued this month, is necessary for the defence of Iceland and the common defences of NATO. For this reason, we will continue to operate the system and this represents a milestone as a new, independent and important Icelandic contribution to the co-operation of the NATO countries. The adaptation of the system to the NATO Integrated Air Defence System, NATINADS, is scheduled for completion within a few weeks.

Our increased responsibility within NATO will also call for participation by Iceland in many of the new peacekeeping tasks undertaken by the Alliance in countries and regions outside NATO's traditional boundaries. However, it must be borne in mind that Iceland has no troops to hold the line between conflicting factions, although we do have highly qualified people in many fields who can play a role when the guns have been silenced. For this reason, Icelandic peacekeeping will primarily have to be in the area known as peacebuilding.

Iceland will never assume any role involving so-called "hard defence". There are no plans, therefore, to establish an Icelandic defence force, or army. This is neither necessary nor desirable, and in fact it would be in contradiction with Icelandic tradition. The last armed men in Iceland were disarmed in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. In this context it is important to bear in mind that one of Iceland's conditions for becoming a founding member of NATO was that the country did not have an army and did not intend to form one. This condition is still fully valid.

However, Iceland's role will be all the more prominent in "soft defence", where the foreign service plays a key role and where work on peacekeeping and development aid will be at the forefront.

Also, we are bound in our international work by our duty to defend certain basic values which are universal and independent of religion, ethnic background and economic position. Ideas such as democracy, freedom, equal rights and human rights are not mere words. They form the foundation of justice and progress throughout the world. They are the philosophical bedrock of Icelandic society and the main international organizations to which it belongs, such as the Nordic Council, NATO and the United Nations. These values are therefore our compass by which our work in the international context is steered, including our work on security and defence.

Even though Iceland is neither a large country nor a populous one, this does not excuse us from participation in international political co-operation, nor does it mean that we have a lesser role to play on the international stage. Iceland is now reaping the full benefits of democratic international co-operation based on the rule of law. It is therefore our moral duty to defend these values and promote them. We must have the ambition and the courage to

make our voices heard and expound our views, and we must be prepared to follow up our words with actions in the international forum. Iceland's increased international contribution and participation, including the candidacy for a seat in the UN Security Council, are extensions of our resolve.

In our times, the concept of *security* extends to more numerous and more complex factors than before. Today, security and defence no longer involve only conventional armed conflict, but also environmental disasters, pollution, natural catastrophes, epidemics and defences against terrorism. In Iceland, we can rejoice in the fact that we are no longer in the line of fire in a Cold War, but precisely for this reason we have to make our own assessment of the threats that we may eventually have to confront and take action based on such comprehensive assessment.

Today, no single state can ensure the safety of its citizens independently, as circumstances more often than not call for international solutions. It is clear that the constantly increasing transport of energy across the North Atlantic, one of Europe's principal food baskets, brings with it a certain risk. International co-operation and co-ordination of the states with interests at stake will prove crucial.

This conference is held under the heading "The Race for the North Pole". There are great interests at stake in the Arctic Ocean, as we all know, and security in the Arctic Ocean is without a doubt one of the biggest issues of Icelandic national security. For years, Iceland has played an important role in shaping international law of the sea, its resources and their utilisation. We will be ready to use our experience in the task of hammering out the necessary rules for the Arctic. In such a process the international Rule of Law must prevail over the rule of force, and the interests of Mankind prevail over the narrow interests of individual states.