

Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting

Salekhard, Russia, 26 October 2006

Minister of Foreign Affairs Jonas Gahr Støre

Mr Chairman,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be here in Salekhard in the Russian Arctic – it is indeed an adventure to make it all the way to the shores of the Kara Sea. What a telling illustration of the vast Arctic dimension – what an appropriate setting for discussing common Arctic challenges and opportunities.

Let me, Mr Chairman, commend you for your good chairmanship and for the generous hospitality offered to us during these recent days.

When I sit in Oslo and look to the east, to the west and to the south, I see contexts that are familiar, well known and well regulated. When I look to the north I see new developments, new opportunities and new challenges: for Norway and for all of us.

For the Norwegian Government, meeting the challenges and opportunities of the High North is a priority. One third of mainland Norway lies north of the Arctic Circle. Norway has the responsibility for managing resources in waters six times the size of its mainland territory.

In an Arctic setting, the key issues are: sustainable use of resources, climate change and environmental protection. It all amounts to securing safe and healthy living conditions for people in the region – not least by taking seriously the rights and needs of the indigenous peoples.

The significance of the Arctic is on the rise – from so many perspectives – regionally and globally. For the last ten years we have made the Arctic Council a setting for managing important parts of our cooperation. This Council is today the key institution for dealing with Arctic issues.

Let me focus on the challenges ahead, and let me start with the climate challenge.

The stakes are high – the Arctic is a window through which we can literally visualise global climate change. Global warming is a fact. It is increasing, and its man-made dimension is beyond doubt.

New evidence adds to our awareness. A recent study from the US Space Agency NASA finds that the Earth is now reaching the warmest levels in the current interglacial period, which has lasted nearly 12 000 years.

The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment showed that the effects of climate change are first seen in the Arctic. The effects could be dramatic, affecting industries, infrastructure, the environment, and vital aspects of human life.

The Arctic Council may not be the appropriate forum for acting on the threat of climate change. But it may serve as a vehicle for promoting appropriate action and disseminating the relevant evidence.

We have to reduce the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere – as stipulated by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

We may not all agree on the Kyoto Protocol and the ways to most effectively reduce global emissions of greenhouse gases. But we must base ourselves on policies that are science-based. The Arctic Council has provided us with extensive and high-quality knowledge on climate change with input from the best experts in all Arctic states.

This is a major contribution to the global knowledge base, and I believe that we – the member states – should share not only the insights of the study, but also the methodology that produced the results. Maybe a similar approach could be applied in other regions of the world where there are specific environmental and societal concerns.

Evidence, facts and updated insights – all this is needed to help move political decisions, help stimulate new research, provide new incentives towards technological breakthroughs. Evidence, facts and insights from the Arctic help to shift the focus towards action and strategies for adaptation and mitigation.

That is why we need to keep climate change high on the agenda of the Arctic Council.

Vital gaps in our knowledge must be filled, and new observations must be incorporated into our models. We need higher data resolution for all parts of the Arctic, and we need better scenarios.

An updated assessment of climate change could be a valuable contribution from the Arctic states to the global work in this field. We are in a unique position around this table to provide full circumpolar monitoring data that can be shared by our scientists.

A comprehensive factual basis for monitoring, assessment and future decision-making in all appropriate forums is crucial.

We now know that we will have to adapt to climate change. Many communities are facing an urgent need to adapt as we speak. Measures will require resources, flexibility and innovative thinking.

Indigenous peoples are vulnerable, and it is our responsibility to respect their rights and to protect the key aspects of their way of life – and at the same time facilitate their ability to exploit opportunities in a changing world. We should cooperate to find the most effective strategies, and the Arctic Council could be the appropriate setting.

The same applies to mitigation. Even though overall emissions of greenhouse gases within the Arctic region are limited, there are important mitigation opportunities in the region. While

other forums might adopt relevant legally binding decisions, there is a role for the Arctic Council in providing data, direction and possible solutions. Our international credibility will be substantially enhanced if we speak with one voice.

We also need to address the issue of the sustainable development of natural resources.

At the same time as we are discussing climate change, the world's demand for energy is steadily increasing. Although every effort must be made to develop renewable energy sources, oil and gas products will continue to be the main energy source for many decades to come.

Some estimates indicate that the Arctic might have up to 25 per cent of undiscovered global petroleum reserves, although cannot be determined until we have harder facts.

For our part, we see the Barents Sea emerging as a new natural gas region. Next year, the first tankers carrying natural gas will be heading for the US from our northernmost town of Hammerfest, and plans for other areas are under development.

Together with our neighbour Russia, we share the ambition of developing this region in accordance with the highest environmental standards. This is an ambition and a responsibility we share with others.

But it is also a real opportunity to demonstrate how modern management can develop a petroleum resource base while protecting the environment, using technology that enables lower levels of emissions and – not to forget – moving ahead while preserving the thousand-year old tradition of harvesting renewable resources.

Fisheries have sustained Arctic coastal communities for centuries, and will continue to play an important role in the future development of the region. The Barents Sea is Europe's largest fishing ground.

It is imperative that the ecological balance of these waters is preserved, and that the total environmental pressure from all activities is not allowed to threaten Arctic ecosystems. We want the highest safety and environmental standards to apply in all Arctic seas.

And we believe that attaining these objectives would constitute a win for all parties concerned.

We have made progress on environmental protection during the years of the Arctic Council's existence. Here again, we need up-to-date, comprehensive and reliable information. I am grateful for all the valuable work being done by the various working groups of the Arctic Council in this regard.

The reports from the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme are recognised as major reference documents on Arctic pollution issues. They have been highly useful as inputs to international agreements. I welcome the programme's report to this meeting as well as all the deliverables from the other working groups.

The extensive Assessment of Oil and Gas Activities in the Arctic, which will be submitted next year, will be an important input to our work to protect the fragile environment at the same time as we develop new economic activities.

The monitoring and assessment work depends on a network of monitoring stations all over the Arctic. Monitoring is a prerequisite for sound science, and I would like to stress the importance of updating and strengthening this network. Filling gaps in the circumpolar monitoring network would be very useful, and would increase the overall value of the data collected.

There are real challenges here. I have noted with concern the delay in the implementation of the project on the environmental hazards posed by PCBs. We would welcome an early resolution of the issue, especially the establishment of destruction facilities for PCBs and other hazardous wastes in Russia.

In our view, it is also of vital importance that the new and alarming findings on man-made mercury pollution are addressed through international legislation.

Allow me also to highlight the project Women and Resource Management in the Rural North. Resource-based industries dominate in the rural Arctic. Giving women equal opportunities is vital – if we fail to do so, they may move away, undermining our rural communities.

Mr Chairman,

We have a lot to build on, and a lot to look forward to.

The Arctic is facing important challenges that no state can deal with effectively alone. And our opportunities for co-operation are vast. Take the whole area of emergency prevention and response. Or take the challenge of meeting the old and new transboundary health issues.

Norway gives high priority to the work of the Arctic Council.

The Council complements the network of regional and sub-national cooperation forums, such as the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Council of the Baltic Sea States.

We are committed to strengthening the Arctic Council – and in order to do so, we will need to look closely at reforming the way we structure our work and set our priorities.

We regard the Arctic Council – the chairmanship of which we are assuming later today – as the main body for circumpolar cooperation.

The future of the Arctic affects us all.

Arctic issues continue to attract the attention of the world around us.

We have to respond to the challenges at hand. The health of the Arctic environment and the well-being of our people depend on it.