

Norwegian MFA Jonas Gahr Støres welcoming remarks at the Sixth Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council, Tromsø, 29 April 2009

Distinguished colleagues,
Representatives,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you to the city of Tromsø, the Arctic capital of Norway.

It was from here that Fridtjof Nansen's ship Fram set out for the North Pole in 1893 – as you can see from this photograph (taken by Olav Ingstad, Helge Ingstad's father, on Nansen's return in 1896). And it was from here that Roald Amundsen set out on 18 June 1928 on his ill-fated flight with the seaplane Latham – in search of his Italian colleague, Umberto Nobile, who was stranded in the Arctic Ocean.

Today, Tromsø is a modern and vibrant city – the home of the Norwegian Polar Institute, and the world's northernmost university, and host to the Arctic Council Secretariat. And it's also home to one of Norway's best football teams. In short, it is a city the likes of which we might find in Continental Europe, but not elsewhere in Norway.

It is a great honour for me to welcome you all to the sixth Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council in these modern Arctic surroundings. It is taking place at a time when the Council – or should I say the Arctic – is facing challenges as well as opportunities and attracting a great deal of attention – increasing attention – from the outside world.

Never before have so many high-level representatives from member states, or so many other nations – observers and interested partners – attended a Council meeting. This testifies to the growing importance of our organisation and its tasks. The Arctic Council is emerging as the key decision shaping body on Arctic affairs. I hope that our agenda and our preparations reflect the broad range of contemporary Arctic issues.

Dear friends,

The Arctic is a region characterised by close cooperation and the absence of conflict, an area of peace and stability. Our primary responsibility is to maintain this favourable situation in the interests of all of mankind.

However, profound changes are occurring. Today we know that climate change is taking place most rapidly and most visibly in the Arctic. It is one of the best places in the world to study its causes and dynamics. And it is this knowledge that will determine whether humanity will be able to address the challenges posed by climate change. Knowledge – and close cooperation.

We know that the Arctic ice is melting. This directly affects some four million people who live in the Arctic. But it also affects many more hundreds of million people in other parts of the world.

Yesterday, Nobel Laureate Al Gore and I co-chaired the Conference on Melting Ice, which brought together some of the world's top experts on the subject. It will be followed up by another conference here in Tromsø in June, continuing a process that will provide input to the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen towards the end of the year. Mr Gore will give us a detailed report on this issue under the next agenda item.

Earlier this month, in Washington, we marked the 50th anniversary of the Antarctic Treaty. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and I chaired a joint meeting of the Antarctic Treaty System and the Arctic Council. It was a rewarding event, and I would like to reiterate my appreciation to the American hosts for the excellent arrangements.

The meeting highlighted that efforts in the Antarctic and in the Arctic are mutually reinforcing, particularly with regard to research on climate change and the environment.

It also underlined that the two regions are fundamentally different in terms of geography, policy and governance.

While the Arctic is an ocean surrounded by land mass, the Antarctic is a land mass surrounded by ocean. The Antarctic has no permanent population, whereas people have lived and prospered in the Arctic for thousands of years.

The five countries surrounding the Arctic Ocean – the United States, Canada, Russia, Denmark/Greenland and Norway – have internationally recognised sovereignty over their land areas and, as a consequence, jurisdiction over their maritime zones.

You could say that in the Antarctic, claims to sovereignty and jurisdiction have been “frozen” in the Antarctic Treaty.

The Arctic Ocean, on the other hand, is not subject to a specific regime or treaty. But this does not leave the Arctic in a legal vacuum. The legal framework for the Arctic is already in place. The Arctic is governed by the principles and rules enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, in addition to various environmental and fisheries agreements, IMO rules and other general regulations. More than 150 states are party to the Law of the Sea Convention. It reflects international customary law on a broad range of key issues.

My point is this: the challenges facing the region have more to do with a lack of implementation of existing rules than with an actual lack of rules. To put it simply, the problem is not a lack of rules, it is a lack of policies. Our responsibility is to help formulate these policies.

Thus, what we need today is not a new, comprehensive international legal regime governing the Arctic Ocean – but rather for governments to come together to develop policies and more specific rules to manage the increasing human activity in the region.

The history of organised cooperation in the Arctic is brief. However, the Arctic Council is becoming an increasingly important body. It is the world's only truly circumpolar organisation. It is also unique in that, in addition to the governments of the United States, Canada, Russia and the five Nordic countries, it includes permanent participants representing indigenous peoples, as well as a number of observer states.

Again – the Arctic Council's role is decision-shaping rather than decision-making.

As outgoing chair, I see a clear need for the Arctic Council to play a more active part in providing guidelines, best practices and knowledge for other international forums where decisions are made.

When we started planning the Norwegian chairmanship, we invited Denmark and Sweden, the next two countries to hold the chairmanship, to take part in a six-year cooperation with a view to enhancing the continuity of the Council's work.

During Norway's two-and-a-half year chairmanship, we have had three main priority areas:

climate change,
integrated resource management, and
strengthening the cooperation itself.

So, what have we achieved? I will first say a few words about climate change.

The 2004 Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) showed that the effects of climate change are first seen in the Arctic. These effects will be increasingly dramatic and can be expected to affect industries, infrastructure, the environment, and other vital aspects of human life.

The project Snow, Water, Ice and Permafrost in the Arctic (SWIPA), which was launched during our chairmanship, focuses on the three key aspects of climate change in the Arctic: the retreat of the sea ice, the melting of the Greenland ice sheet and the reduction of permafrost and snow cover. These are all trends that will also have huge global impacts in terms of global warming and rising sea levels.

The final report from this project will be submitted to the Ministerial Meeting in 2011, and will provide input to the next assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

But we need to take action before 2011. I am very pleased that the project will make a preliminary report to COP 15 in December, hopefully providing valuable input to

negotiators, just as the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) helped to shape the report of the IPCC.

As the Conference on Melting Ice made very clear yesterday, the long-term preservation of the Arctic will only be possible if we reduce global emissions of greenhouse gases to sustainable levels. Scientists tell us that CO₂ emissions must peak by 2020 to avoid the most serious consequences of global warming. However, even then, the reduction in global warming will not be fast enough to preserve the polar environment as we know it today.

So – as we all know only too well – the challenges are enormous.

However, we already have technology that can make a real difference. For example methods of reducing the emissions of three major short-lived pollutants: black carbon, methane and ozone. Interesting new research shows that these common pollutants have contributed almost as much to temperature rises in the Arctic over the past century as CO₂ emissions.

An important outcome of our meeting will be the establishment of a task force on non-CO₂ drivers of climate change. This task force is to identify existing and new measures to reduce emissions of these pollutants and recommend immediate actions.

Given that these pollutants are short-lived and the technology to remove them is cheap and already available, reductions would have a rapid effect that could enable regions of ice and snow to survive long enough for CO₂ reductions to have an impact.

As politicians we have a duty not only to pay close attention to this, but also to act quickly on the basis of the precautionary principle. This is a real opportunity that we must not hesitate to seize.

Important work on vulnerability and adaptation to climate change in the Arctic is now under way. It will look at the needs of local and indigenous populations for support in order to preserve their unique traditions. It will examine problems relating to infrastructure and the need for legislation to ensure that increased commercial activity does not damage already fragile ecosystems. This collaborative effort started with information sharing and networking.

I would also like to mention the EALAT project, which is studying reindeer herders' traditional knowledge in relation to adaptation to climate change.

In other words, the Arctic Council's focus on sustainable development and climate change has been strengthened. Our actions must be guided by knowledge. Research and studies initiated by the Arctic Council have helped to provide such vital knowledge.

Now I will turn to our second main priority, integrated resource management.

The Arctic, and especially the Arctic Ocean, has always been remote and difficult to access. This is now about to change. The sea ice has been dramatically reduced in recent decades and could soon disappear altogether during the summer.

The consequences may be dramatic for the environment and for the people who depend on the ice for their livelihoods. At the same time, new opportunities will arise for commercial activities such as shipping, fisheries and the offshore petroleum industry.

These developments will have to be addressed by the Arctic states in order to protect the environment and ensure sustainability. It will be a huge balancing act.

However, the Arctic Council is already addressing these new challenges. This work is far from completed, but we have initiated projects in relation to many of the emerging activities in the Arctic. Let me briefly mention five steps forward in this respect:

First, a comprehensive study on oil and gas activities has just been finalised. It makes a number of important recommendations.

In addition, the recently revised guidelines for oil and gas exploration in the Arctic define minimum procedures and standards. I urge all of us – as a minimum – to implement these standards and procedures in oil and gas exploration in the Arctic. And I strongly support a deepening of our cooperation on these crucial issues.

Second, several projects have been launched to address maritime safety in the Arctic.

(This picture shows the cruise ship Antarctic Dream which ran aground on a rock in the Hinlopen Strait in Svalbard in foggy weather last July. A joint operation involving the Governor of Svalbard's vessel and the Russian vessel Grigory Mikheyev was required to rescue the ship.)

There is also a need to develop and implement oil spill prevention measures in connection with increased maritime transport in the Arctic. Of particular importance here is the Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment.

The Arctic states have agreed to cooperate actively within the International Maritime Organization (IMO) on establishing guidelines for ships operating in ice-covered waters, and on the development of mandatory international regulations on safety and environmental protection in Arctic waters. This is a matter of urgency.

Third, the Arctic Council recently finalised a report on ocean management that sets out agreed requirements for ecosystem-based ocean management, including living marine resources.

Fourth, we have approved a new project on the development of safety systems in connection with the implementation of economic and infrastructural projects in the

Arctic. Russia and Norway will take the lead in this project, and I believe we should start by strengthening cooperation on the prevention of, and response to, accidental spills of oil and hazardous substances.

Fifth – and finally – we have agreed to strengthen cooperation on search and rescue in the Arctic, by establishing a task force to develop and negotiate an international instrument on cooperation in this area.

I said earlier on that the challenges facing the Arctic region have more to do with a lack of policies – and the need for governments to come together to develop policies and develop more specific rules to manage the increasing human activity in the region.

This is exactly what these five projects are doing. Strengthening cooperation. Focusing on implementation.

Let me therefore conclude with a few remarks about cooperation within the Arctic Council itself.

The organisation deals with a broad range of issues, including climate change, pollution, biodiversity, protection of the marine environment, and emergency prevention and response. Our work is carried out in six working groups. I have only mentioned a few highlights from the last two years, but I would like to emphasise that a lot of good work has also been done in other areas.

In October last year, Norway held an Arctic Council meeting at deputy-minister level to discuss important aspects of Arctic climate change. State observers to the Council were also invited.

This meeting proved a useful way of informing governments of new developments and bolstering political interest between the biannual Ministerials. It was also a good way of increasing the involvement of the observers to the Council.

I am pleased that we have agreed to hold such meetings on a biannual basis. This means that the Arctic Council will now meet at political level once a year, which is in line with the recommendation from the last meeting of Arctic parliamentarians. It will enhance the political character of our work, the role of governments and the role of decision makers.

A secretariat for the Arctic Council has been established here in Tromsø. I congratulate the secretariat on the way it has done its work, and on the way in which it has added value to our work. Norway, Denmark and Sweden have agreed that the secretariat should continue to operate at least up to the 2013 Ministerial Meeting. I sincerely hope that the secretariat will have proven its value by then, and that it will continue in Tromsø on a permanent basis.

During my chairmanship, we have had extensive discussions on the role of observers in the Arctic Council. It is Norway's view that the Arctic Council is served by having

officially sanctioned observers. Formalisation of the status of observers strengthens the undisputed role of the Arctic Council as the leading Arctic circumpolar body. Everyone agrees that the observers are important partners, and we will continue to discuss the ways in which, and the extent, to which they can participate in the Council's work.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The future of the Arctic will affect us all. We are in this Arctic effort together. Our challenges are of a transboundary nature – but so are our opportunities. Thus, they need to be addressed through dedicated international cooperation.

I would like extend my warmest thanks to all of you for the active support we have enjoyed during our chairmanship of the Arctic Council, and I wish our Danish friends every success when they take over after this meeting. Special thanks go to Al Gore for his personal contribution to our conference yesterday. I now have the pleasure of giving him the floor so he can report on the outcome of that conference.

Thank you.