Mr. Chairperson,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I had the pleasure to be present in Ottawa in September 1996 and - as then Minister for Environment and International Development - to sign the Ottawa Declaration. A Declaration which established the Arctic Council, a Council which evolved from the so-called Rovaniemi Process and adoption of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy.

Today we celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the Council. The achievements have by far exceeded expectations. The Arctic Council has evolved into a primary forum for circumpolar cooperation. It plays an important part in maintaining the region as a zone of peace and constructive cooperation.

In the Declaration we signed 25 years ago we affirmed our commitment to the well-being of the inhabitants of the Arctic including recognition of the special relationship and unique contributions to the Arctic of Indigenous People and their communities. With the new challenges and opportunities facing the Arctic today, this holds true more than ever. The Arctic Council is internationally unique with regard to the role that the Permanent Participants have and we should continue to listen attentively their views, experiences and ideas.

The Arctic Council has also become the object of increased international attention. We must therefore ensure that our Council will remain equipped for the new challenges and opportunities.

Colleagues,
I would wish to express my gratitude to the excellent manner the Icelandic Chairmanship team has steered our work. The Ministerial Declaration and a Strategic Plan are ambitious documents and clearly demonstrate the importance we all attach to the role of the Arctic States, the Permanent Participants and to the key role the Arctic Council plays.

Climate change, environmental protection and sustainable development are the crucial priorities and the foundation of our work. Finland belongs to the group of the most ambitious countries in climate policy, actively advocating the climate targets: global shift away from coal, greening of the development banks and the accelerating of ambition of major emitters. Finland aims at being climate neutral already by 2035.

Finland promotes a strong Arctic angle in international climate policy and welcomes the strong commitment of the Arctic Council in this regard. It is important to work for a broad cooperation to cut black carbon emissions globally. Black carbon accelerates the melting of ice and snow in the Arctic region and on mountains. Emission reductions from heat and power production, transport and gas flaring are needed in the Arctic States and globally.

There are also many other environmental risks in the Arctic region which call for enhanced cooperation. One of such fields is nuclear waste and safety, originally launched as a G8 non-proliferation initiative. A total of 18,000 radioactive objects remain still at the bottom of the Arctic Ocean and of the six particularly radiation-hazardous sites in the area, two submarines (K-27 and K-159) are the most dangerous. The Northern Dimension’s Environmental Partnership (NDEP) has already in the past addressed these challenges, but the effort will continue to need technical support from the international community due to the complexity of the task.

Most important is that we remain mindful of the people living in the arctic region and respect their wishes to prosper and to have a realistic chance of building a better future for themselves and their children. Encouraging businesses with environmentally friendly approaches is crucial for securing sustainable economic activity in the region. Green transition contributes to sustainable job creation. The coming Finnish Presidency in the
Barents Euro-Arctic Council 2021-23 will focus especially on the people-to-people contacts, the areas of sustainable development and healthy environment.

Dear colleagues,

In addition to tackling climate, environment and sustainable development, together with the Indigenous Peoples, there are also new challenges that the Council must take seriously.

Ocean governance and marine issues will be increasingly more important. As a member of the Global Ocean Alliance, Finland is committed to protecting at least 30% of the global ocean by 2030. Keeping the Oceans healthy and resilient, and protecting their nature values for future generations will call for increased attention also from the Arctic Council.

The current pandemic has changed our lives. The Arctic remains particularly vulnerable due to long distances and the fact that the thawing permafrost risks releasing dangerous pathogens to the atmosphere. We must take preventive action and coordinate our work also on public health.

Mr Chairperson,
Dear Colleagues,

Russia will now take the helm for the next two years. I wish Minister Lavrov and his Arctic team all the best in steering the Council onwards. As this work proceeds, it will be important to maintain and seek consensus of all members and Permanent Participants and to make sure that all aspects within the Council’s remit deserve equal attention. Doing so will ensure a successful next Ministerial meeting in Russia in 2023.

Thank you.