



Remarks at the Presentation of the U.S. Chairmanship

Program at the Arctic Council Ministerial

Remarks

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Well, thank you again very, very much, Leona. I really appreciate it. And thank you to everybody for the terrific cooperation with Admiral Papp and others over the course of the last months to help frame this agenda. And again, congratulations on all you've done during the course of this. I think Canada has set a high bar, and it's given us a lot of confidence that a lot can be achieved in two short years.

We're very honored to assume the chairmanship of the Arctic Council today, and in the nearly two decades now since it was first created, I think it's fair to say that the council's created a great shared sense of purpose, but it's also created a sense of trust among all the countries and with the permanent representatives. And I think in doing so, we've laid the groundwork to be able to meet a very tough set of future challenges. With your help, we have developed what we acknowledge is an ambitious agenda, but we believe it's achievable and it's an important demarcation moving forward, if you will, at this particular point in the council's history.

Broadly speaking, the U.S. chairmanship will focus on three interconnected themes. First, addressing the issue of climate, the impacts of climate change. Second, promoting ocean safety, security, and stewardship. And third, improving economic and living conditions for Arctic communities. The theme of our chairmanship is "One Arctic," which is a phrase long used by the Inuit Circumpolar Council, which embodies our belief that the entire world – not only the Arctic, not only the eight here plus, but the entire world shares a responsibility to protect, to respect, to nurture, and to promote the region.

And over the next two years, as we work to further strengthen the Arctic Council as the premier intergovernmental forum for addressing Arctic challenges, we're also going to strive to expand awareness of the links between this region and everywhere else – and we do mean everywhere. As the observer states know well, all countries have a reason to care about the future of the Arctic. It's a critical part of the global climate system, literally ensuring a stable, livable environment from Barrow, Alaska, to Beijing, China, and the fact is it is rapidly changing. How we as Arctic states, and indeed as a global community, respond to those changes over the coming months and years can literally make all the difference.

One of the biggest challenges everybody has talked about today is climate change. The numbers are alarming, and that's putting it mildly. The Arctic is warming faster than any other region on Earth. Temperatures are increasing at more than twice the rate of the global average. And what these rising temperatures mean is that the resilience of our communities and our ecosystems, the ability of future generations to be able to adapt and live and prosper in the Arctic the way people have for thousands of years is tragically but actually in jeopardy.

Now over the last three decades, both the increase in temperatures and the corresponding decrease in sea ice observed in the Arctic are unprecedented in at least the 1,500 years that we can measure. In the American Arctic summer, sea ice could very well disappear almost entirely by mid-century, which would alter marine ecosystems and increase the vulnerability of communities in the Arctic – in the system as a consequence of coastal erosion. And as permafrost thaws, which we are seeing at alarming rate, we are witnessing more and more wildfires, collapsing infrastructures, and the potential release of vast amounts of greenhouse gasses that only speed up the warming, because methane, as we all know, is 20 times more potent in the damage it does than CO2.

Arctic glaciers in the Greenland ice sheet are shrinking substantially and driving global sea level rise. And this in turn threatens to unleash flooding and storm surges, causing immeasurable harm not only to Arctic communities, but to urban and rural settlements along the coasts of every ocean. I think we saw some record level of billions of dollars – 110, -20 billion it was last year in damages as a consequence of these kinds of events.

Now I want to underscore: This is not a future challenge. This is happening right now. And as they lose their natural sea ice barrier, villages in the Arctic are already being battered by storms. And as the permafrost continues to thaw, the infrastructure that depends on it is becoming more and more damaged. Houses and other buildings are literally collapsing already. Take the community of Galena, Alaska, for example. In 2013, Galena and a number of other villages in the state faced terrible hardships after an ice jam caused the Yukon River to flood, because natural defenses had melted away 90 percent. Ninety percent of Galena's buildings were completely destroyed.

So we're on a dangerous path. And during the U.S. chairmanship, President Obama and I pledge during the time we're there – I think we're there for all but about four or five months of it – my government – or three months of it – my government will work every single day with members of this council to help prepare Arctic communities for the impacts of this change. And we'll do everything we can to prevent even worse impacts in years to come, which is why we negotiated our numbers last year with China, and why we went to India and moved to an announcement with India, and are working with other major emitting nations to make sure we put out our INDCs, our determined contributions, in order to go to Paris in as strong a position as possible.

We are calling on the council to contribute to detailed examinations of the local ecosystem, so we understand them better. And we propose to expand the local environmental observer group network to encourage citizens to get involved in monitoring their own communities and contributing to our preventative measures and to our knowledge. We also support the creation of an enhanced digital elevation map of the Arctic, which will provide much better information to scientists and other experts in sustainable development and help us make wise development decisions as we go forward.

The greater our understanding of forthcoming challenges, then the better we are able to predict the regional impacts on climate change before they hit, and then the smarter and more collective our response will be able to be. But even as we take necessary steps to prepare for climate change, we also have a shared responsibility to do everything we can to slow its advance, and we cannot afford to take our eye off that ball.

The Arctic Council can do more on climate change, especially when it comes to black carbon emissions. Black carbon is up to 2,000 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Once it's released, this dark soot collects on the surface of snow, visible to the naked eye – covered sea ice as well – and it absorbs the solar radiation and then it acts a blanket that traps heat. It doesn't take a PhD to know that the combination of heat and ice produces melting. So collectively, Arctic Council members in observer states contribute more than 60 percent of black carbon pollution. So if we want to know where the problem begins, all we have to do is look in the mirror.

But that's also where the solution is staring us in the face. During our chairmanship, the United States intends to press for the full implementation of the Framework for Action on Enhanced Black Carbon and Methane Emissions. And that includes the compilation of national black carbon and methane emission inventories, national reporting on domestic mitigation efforts, and greater international cooperation on reducing these dangerous pollutants.

We also call on observer states in the Council to join us in this effort. Because the fact is these pollutants are a threat to everybody. And our cooperation is particularly timely in the run-up to COP 21 in December in Paris. And I think all of us are hoping to achieve a broader, more ambitious global agreement on climate action. And doing so really matters deeply for a host of reasons, but it's also an indispensable part of a responsibility that is shared by every member of this council, and that is the stewardship of the Arctic Ocean.

As many of you know, or maybe – I know my fellow ministers know this because many attended or sent people to a conference we did in Washington on the oceans this past year; it'll be followed up by a conference in Chile this year, and then we will pick it up and do it again next year in Washington in order to try to galvanize action about our oceans, which are overfished and over-polluted and certainly over-acidified at this point. But the health of the ocean is critical to all of us.

And one of the things we focused on in Washington is ocean acidification. Carbon dioxide does not just drive climate change. It also gets absorbed by the ocean, although we saw the first regurgitation by the ocean of CO₂ in the Antarctic this past year, so we don't know what the limits of that absorption are, which is another challenge for all of us on Earth. But to the degree that it does get absorbed by the ocean, it winds up threatening marine ecosystems on which we all depend. And the cold temperatures of the Arctic Ocean make it particularly vulnerable to acidification, science tells us. And the science is actually jarring on this. If current trends continue, scientists predict that by the end of the century, the Arctic waters will become corrosive to all shell-building creatures. So think about that – what that would mean to the entire Arctic food chain in addition to the people whose livelihoods depend on those creatures.

Despite all of this, incomprehensibly, ocean acidification is often an overlooked impact of climate change. A lot of people don't even focus on it. For one thing, we actually don't even know enough about it, especially in the Arctic. So during our chairmanship, we're going to call on every Arctic and observer state to join the Global Ocean Acidification Observer Network to facilitate greater monitoring of Arctic waters. And here as well, the more information we have about what's happening, the better we will be able to address it.

Another effort that's critical to ensuring the stewardship of the Arctic Ocean is continuing the council's work on developing a pan-Arctic network of marine protected areas. As the ice continues to melt, navigability of the Arctic Ocean is expanding. And while there are benefits to that – and there are some – increased human traffic also means that even more maritime ecosystems will be at risk of being either disturbed or even destroyed. Creating a network of marine protected areas throughout the region will help us safeguard areas that are particularly significant both culturally and ecologically. And we can also create a regional seas program for the Arctic, something that nations have done in other parts of the world to improve cooperation on marine science and share best practices.

Let me add: The stewardship of the Arctic Ocean is obviously critically important, but so is ensuring the safety and the security. In recent years, the Arctic Council developed two historic agreements to improve the chances that the increase that we are seeing in human traffic can take place safely and securely. Over the next two years, we intend to use those agreements robustly through joint operational exercises, training and information exchange, so that we're better prepared to respond to the incidents at sea.

Ultimately, the people of this region, as we've said again and again, are our top priority. And we want that to be a hallmark of our chairmanship. We fully intend to continue Canada's effort to improve the lives of the Arctic indigenous peoples, and that means focusing on water security and on protecting the freshwater system that the people of the Arctic need and deserve. It means redoubling our efforts to address the tragically and disproportionately high rates of suicide that plague the Arctic. And we heard discussion a little while ago, and it means creating tools to improve mental health. It means assessing the region's telecommunications infrastructure, which is absolutely essential to regional connectivity, health care delivery, scientific observation, navigation, emergency response, and more. And certainly it means encouraging economic development, including development of natural resources, but insisting that this be done wisely, carefully, and in a way that doesn't counteract efforts to address other significant challenges, such as, obviously, climate change itself.

And along the same lines, improving the lives of the Arctic indigenous peoples also means expanding access to clean, affordable, and renewable energy technologies that will provide local communities with alternatives to the costly and dirty diesel-based electricity that too many are forced to rely on today.

A couple of years ago, a massive storm prevented the village of Nome, Alaska, from receiving its last barge delivery of home heating fuel – of diesel and gasoline for the winter. By the time the weather calmed down, Nome was already iced in, and it looked certain that the community was going to run out of fuel in the spring. Well, the fuel eventually arrived thanks to the Coast Guard cutter Healy, but it came with exorbitant costs and after an enormous amount of stress had been lived through by the entire community.

My friends, clean energy is the solution to climate change. If we got the whole world to embrace clean energy choices rapidly, we can meet our two-degree

target. But the window's closing. The extraordinary thing is all of the technologies we need – whether it's wind or solar or hydro or whatever, they're all there. It's the economics that don't drive people to make the choice, so we've got a lot of countries putting on coal-fired burning right now, and the coal-fired burning they're putting on will totally erase the gains that a lot of other countries are making at the same time.

So we have to have a serious conversation about this, which is why President Obama has been pushing our national program so hard, and why we are so focused on this. Clean energy is the solution to climate change. It also happens to be the world's biggest market. It will make many people rich. Enormous numbers of jobs will be created. Environmental responsibility can be lived up to. People's health will be better. And security will be greater for a lot of countries that today are blackmailed by one source of fuel of one kind or another.

So many benefits. How many public choices do you get to make where there are so many pluses on the good side versus the negatives on the downside? Very few.

So it is essential, especially in the Arctic, to providing affordable, reliable energy that is needed here. We got to find the ways to do it. During our chairmanship, we're going to examine every chance for greater circumpolar collaboration to develop renewable energy and promote energy efficiency in Arctic communities.

So in closing, let me just underscore: Again, I say, as I said in the beginning, we understand this is ambitious. But we have to be ambitious. And the challenges that we're facing require us to try to step up. And we're also aware that our chairmanship comes at a pivotal time for the Arctic and for the council. The decisions that we make today and in the next two years, the actions that we come together to take, will determine the future of this region for generations to come. So we have to be ambitious, we have to honor the responsibility that each of our nations has for the Arctic, we have to make sure the opportunities that we explore help to preserve the sustainability and the vitality of this region and by extension the rest of the world. And we all know the clock is ticking and we actually don't have a lot of time to waste.

So we very much look forward to working with all of you – the Arctic states, the permanent participants, the observer states – because we have to meet these goals, and we have to build on the tremendous progress that this council has made over 20 years and write the history of the next 20. Thank you all.