

Remarks at the Arctic Council Ministerial Session

Remarks

John Kerry

Secretary of State

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Thank you very much, Minister Bildt, and thank you for hosting this important event. I'm pleased to be joined at the table by our senior Arctic official Julia Gourley and I'm pleased also to have Senator from Alaska, Senator Lisa Murkowski, a good friend of mine from the Senate, who cares about these issues enormously.

It's an honor to be here in Kiruna, and I begin by saying that there are many areas where the eight Arctic states' interests overlap significantly. And despite our different sizes and our different cultures, and many of the varied interests that we've heard today from permanent participants, we share many values and priorities. But there is nothing that should unite us quite like our concern for both the promise and the challenges of the northern-most reaches of the earth.

What makes this organization so important is that the consequences of our nations' decisions don't stop at the 66th parallel. And that's especially true today, when the threat of climate change is as ominous as ever, its effects are as tangible as ever, and the courage – literally, the courage – that we summon in the coming months and years is as crucial as ever. This is one of the most obvious shared challenges on the face of the planet today. I don't think there's any one of us here who hasn't visibly noticed with our own eyes or experienced the changes in fragile ecosystems.

When I was a senator, I worked with the late Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska in order to end driftnet fishing on the high seas. And more than once I rewrote America's fisheries laws, the Magnuson-Stevens Act, to try to protect our fisheries. But the truth is that today fisheries all across the planet are challenged with too much money chasing too few fish. Today, as Secretary of State, I come here keenly aware that the long list of challenges – acidification, pollution, ice melt, rising sea levels, disappearing species, and indiscriminate development practices – all of these carry even more challenges downstream, so to speak, to each of our economies, to our national security, and to international stability.

So Carl, I applaud the Arctic Council, which addresses these challenges, and your exemplary leadership of the last two years in tenure. And I'm pleased to look forward to Canada's leadership.

I'm pleased that President Obama, just a few days ago, released the U.S. National Strategy for the Arctic Region, reaffirming that a secure and well-managed Arctic marked by international cooperation and conflict – an absence of conflict – is a key policy priority of the United States. And we look forward to filling out the details of that with all of you over the course of the next few years.

I also look forward to joining my fellow ministers in signing the oil agreement that we will reach today. That's an important framework for cooperation in the event of an emergency. And as the United States was reminded painfully in the Gulf of Mexico three years ago, we need strong partnerships and shared operational guidelines before a disaster occurs in order to make sure that we're able to respond. So we need to prevent crises from happening in the first place, and that frankly brings me back to climate change.

Just last week in one of the major newspapers in the United States, the *New York Times*, it was reported that the atmospheric levels of CO₂ exceeded 400 parts per million for an entire 24-hour period for the first time in recorded history. That is the highest level of CO₂ in three or four million years. Temperatures we know in the Arctic are increasing more than twice as fast as global averages, and they are endangering habitats and they are endangering ways of life.

Last September, the extent of sea ice covering the Arctic reached a record low, threatening marine mammal life and the indigenous and local communities that depend on them. As many of you – or all of you – know, warming also erodes the natural barrier of ice that shields Alaska's coast from hostile waters, and that causes homes to fall into the sea, it causes pollution. And the thawing of the permafrost, which is increasingly releasing methane, which is 20 times more damaging than CO₂ – that has led to the first Arctic wildfires in thousands of years.

So the scientific research in each of our countries is more imperative than ever in order to protect the atmosphere, the global economy, the food chain, and the air we breathe. And we need to do more – all of us – urgently. The businesses investing in the region are obviously crucial to bringing new industries, jobs, and people to the Arctic to promote, but we need to make sure that we are promoting that growth in responsible ways. And we've heard from our friends and the permanent participators today about the urgency of that.

So I want to confirm that in all of these efforts, and so many more that we look forward to discussing in the next years, the United States is committed to being a productive and engaged partner. And we look forward to the Canadian chairmanship that begins today. We're also planning ahead for the U.S. chairmanship from 2015 to '17. And I greatly respect the hundreds of generations of tradition, culture, and expertise that has been built by the indigenous communities who have called this extraordinary place home for thousands of years. They shape this council's work and they guide our decision-making, and they should.

America became an Arctic nation only about 150 years ago, when another Secretary of State, William Seward, had the vision to purchase Alaska, dramatically changing, not only our map but our choices, our landscape, our resources, and our identity as a nation. So we're proud to join you today in the important work of protecting and preserving our shared Arctic, not just for the nations that touch it, but for the way that what happens here, for the stewardship that we have responsibility to execute, for the way that it touches every single person around the world and our way of life.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.