

Address by U.S. Ambassador to Iceland Robert C. Barber
To Varðberg
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Iceland, the United States, and North Atlantic and European Security

Thank you, Bjorn, for your very kind introduction.

I am very grateful to you and to Varðberg for organizing today's event; I am truly honored to be here. I'd like to take this opportunity to talk about the dynamic U.S.-Icelandic security and defense relationship, as well as security issues affecting the North Atlantic and Europe more broadly. I plan to discuss the bilateral relationship between Iceland and the United States, continue with issues of Nordic defense cooperation, and examine both challenges facing the NATO alliance and commitments made by NATO member states, then offer some thoughts on what I believe it all means for Iceland. I shall conclude with a call for serious reflection.

But first, if you will permit me a personal comment – I have been in Iceland about 300 days now, and on most every one of those days I have been asked, “How do you like Iceland?” My immediate response and I hope you are not hearing it here first – “I love it.” Then – “What is your favorite thing?” – and I resist answering that question, as to offer one thing might not be very diplomatic, but nearly ten months in I do have an answer, and I hope it is no surprise to you. Yours is a stunning country, visually; I have seen such remarkable beauty around your Iceland. I remember only last month standing with my youngest son and some New England friends in front of Gljúfrabúi, the falls a short walk from Seljalandsfoss, and being astounded at the beautiful vistas in every direction – waterfalls, glacier, plains, black sand beach beyond. But, as awesome as is the physical beauty of your island, I have to say that my favorite part of Iceland is you, the Icelandic people, who have impressed me so

deeply by your friendliness, your warmth, and your kindness. This I have experienced at every turn, on every day that I've been here. I remember an elderly man who spoke no English, but who for my benefit unlocked the small church at the base of Helgafell near Stykkishólmur, and proudly showed me the historic artifacts inside. And I recall too the Icelanders I met on my way up the path to Steinn on Mount Esja, who on their way down urged me, then moving very, very slowly, to keep on, to take those last challenging steps; and it was worth it. I have enjoyed every day among you, privileged to serve as U.S. Ambassador to Iceland.

You are not just an independent people, but an exceptional people, whose country is among the most peaceful in the world, and its people among the happiest. And so, in these difficult times you face a real challenge-how to preserve that peace and how to protect that happiness, while addressing the serious concerns we now all face. And that is why our security cooperation is so important. Let me now turn to that subject.

Bilateral Defense Cooperation

I am very proud to say the Icelandic-U.S. security relationship historically has been, and it is now, robust. The defense agreement signed by our two nations in 1951 has been the cornerstone of our defense relationship since that signing and to this very day. For 55 of those years, from 1951-2006, that relationship included U.S. operation of the Naval Air Station at Keflavik. I realize that some have characterized the closing of the base in 2006 as strategically short-sighted, but that decision was a function of the realities of that time. What certainly can be said is that the 2006 closure did not spell the end of our security and defense relationship with Iceland. Keflavik remains a functioning NATO facility, expertly maintained by the Icelandic Coast Guard, with regular visits by U.S. forces. I echo Foreign

Minister Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson's remarks in July this year, at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, that the U.S.-Iceland defense relationship has matured and developed since the base closure. Our cooperation now increasingly takes into account emerging threats and non-military challenges.

In 2006, Iceland and the United States signed the Joint Understanding, establishing a framework for regular security consultations between our two countries. This framework provides for both periodic senior-level strategic discussions and for expert-level discussions on both military and non-military security issues. Under the framework, we hold consultations – our Strategic Dialogue – on political, security, and defense relations, as well as on international issues of mutual interest, which take place annually and serve as the primary venue for a formal political dialogue between our nations. The location alternates between Reykjavik and Washington, with the last meeting taking place in Washington in March of this year, and the next expected to be held here in Reykjavik in early 2016.

Iceland Air Policing

Both Iceland and the U.S. are founding members of NATO, and it is also through this Alliance that Iceland and the United States continue to successfully cooperate on issues of mutual concern. For example, since 2008, NATO Allies have deployed periodic air policing missions to Iceland. The United States has been a key contributor to this important undertaking, deploying U.S. air assets to Iceland in every year since the inception of the missions (the only NATO member state to do so). The most recent U.S. deployment took place in May of this year, and we anticipate that another will occur in the first half of 2016.

High-level U.S. Visitors

Now, many of you are undoubtedly aware of the visits to Iceland by several high level U.S. defense officials to Iceland which have occurred in recent months. Some of these individuals also hold positions of leadership within the NATO structure. Discussions held during these visits feed into the constant assessment, and reassessment, of the changing situation in the North Atlantic, and the processes by which policy is determined in both Washington and Brussels. U.S. representatives and our Icelandic counterparts have ongoing conversations about how to strengthen our bilateral relationship in a multitude of areas—economic cooperation, defense, and exchange programs, to name a few. We would not be doing our jobs if we did not have these conversations. It is a vital part of nurturing cooperative links between friendly countries.

In fact, just last month we formed a new link, as both Iceland and the United States were among the eight Arctic nations participating in the formal establishment of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, in a historic summit of international coast guard representatives held at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut. The Arctic Coast Guard Forum, which mirrors similar fora of both Pacific and Atlantic nations, is intended to be an operationally focused organization that strengthens maritime cooperation and coordination among Arctic nations. So, our connections with Iceland continue to grow, and ongoing discussion is part of that.

Nordic Defense Cooperation

I would also like to highlight the increasing defense cooperation among Nordic countries, beyond the boundaries of NATO. In addition to periodic air policing missions by the other two Nordic NATO members, Denmark and Norway, there occurred in February 2014 an example of broader Nordic defense cooperation, where two non-NATO Nordic states,

Finland and Sweden, participated in the Iceland Air Meet, a NATO-coordinated air defense training event. While both these nations have participated for decades in NATO's Partnership for Peace program, this was the first time that Finland and Sweden deployed assets to Iceland. The goals of the Iceland Air Meet were to improve deployability and interoperability, provide additional training opportunities, and further strengthen Nordic defense cooperation among both NATO members and non-members. Through their participation in the event, the Nordic countries took a step together toward improving cooperation in the spheres of defense, security, and search and rescue in the Arctic.

More recently, in April 2015 the Nordic countries jointly took a decisive public stance on security and defense, in response to the changing security situation in Europe (specifically Russian aggression in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea). Nordic ministers including Foreign Minister Sveinsson penned a joint op-ed piece, describing Russian actions as the greatest challenge to the European security architecture, which has caused deterioration in the security situation in Northern Europe. In response to this, the ministers stated their intention to work more closely on security and defense issues. They said they would counter the more frequent Russian military exercises and intelligence operations in the Baltic Sea and the High North, through solidarity and enhanced cooperation, and by doing so, they would strengthen cohesion with the EU and NATO while also maintaining the transatlantic link.

Even more recently, at the Nordic Council Assembly last month here in Reykjavik, Foreign Minister Sveinsson reaffirmed the importance of ongoing Nordic collaboration, declaring that the Nordics can achieve much more together than separately.

Challenges Facing NATO

Turning to NATO, I want to stress what we all know: NATO was founded as, and remains, a defensive alliance. The greatest responsibility of the Alliance is to protect and defend our member nations, territories, and populations against attack, as set forth in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. This principle of collective defense is the steadfast pillar of the Alliance. The United States will never forget that NATO in 2001 invoked Article 5 for the first time in its history following the 9/11 terrorist attacks against my country. NATO's ability to uphold Article 5 is a function of both united political will and sufficient defense investment. More on that in a moment, but first I want to talk about current security challenges facing NATO.

Considering the rate of change we have seen in the European geopolitical situation over the past year, and the horrific events in Paris last Friday, it is indisputably clear that we cannot take the security of the Euro-Atlantic region for granted. Strong international ties and commitment to collective defense remain the foundation of our strength. To the east, Europe faces a resurgent Russia which has moved forward with a strategy to fundamentally challenge internationally accepted norms, and to change international borders, as it asserts itself on the global stage. Allies, including Iceland as noted earlier, have spoken with a single voice in condemning Russia's occupation of Crimea and its continued destabilization of Ukraine. NATO has suspended practical cooperation with Russia, and there will be no business as usual with NATO until Russia returns to compliance with its international commitments.

Also, in reaction to Russia's actions in Ukraine, both the EU and the United States have instituted sanctions against Russia. None of us wanted to be in this position, and we have made the point through multiple channels, to both the Russian government and the Russian people, that these sanctions are the direct result of, and response to, policy decisions made by

Moscow. Let me be very clear, just as our government has consistently and repeatedly stated: The aim of sanctions is not to direct punitive action against the Russian people, but rather to prompt a change in the aggressive policy of the Russian government vis-à-vis its neighbors. We want a strong, democratic, prosperous Russia that respects the rule of law at home and abroad, as well as its neighbors' sovereignty; a Russia that works with us, and with Europe, to build peace and security in the region and globally. But that must be a choice made by the Russian people and their leaders.

Since 1992 the United States alone has spent more than 20 billion dollars to help Russia, to strengthen and open its economy; prepare for accession to the WTO; promote clean and open governance, and nuclear non-proliferation; and support closer ties between Russia and NATO. However, that kind of cooperation cannot continue when Russia, through its violation of the borders of another sovereign nation, threatens the principles on which the transatlantic partnership was founded. All members of the international community are bound by common rules and should face costs if they don't live up to the solemn commitments that they make.

Russia in the east is, of course, just one of the challenges facing NATO, it is one end of what leaders have begun to refer to as the arc of instability. As events of the past week have once again shown, additional and serious security challenges emanate from Europe's south and southeast, in North Africa and the Middle East. From ISIL to migration, these challenges are complex, and require integrated, coordinated responses.

Wales Summit Commitments and the Cost of European Security

I turn now to the September 2014 NATO Summit in Wales. The Defensive Investment Pledge that the leaders of all 28 member states signed onto at that summit was a milestone. It was a collective decision, one made in the face of increasing instability, unfinished NATO business in Afghanistan and Kosovo and NATO's partnerships with nations around the globe, and in light of changing defense technologies. To address these realities, and the costs to be incurred in that effort, our leaders committed to reverse the decline in national defense budgets, and to move, over the course of a decade, toward allocating two percent of GDP for defense spending. They further agreed that within the two percent, they would commit 20 percent toward capital investment—not toward manpower, not toward operations, but toward new equipment. Two percent and 20 percent, these numbers represent important, significant commitments – commitments that will not be met overnight. It is important to remember, in discussing collective defense, that the North Atlantic Treaty also calls on the parties to maintain and develop their capacities to resist armed attack individually, as well as collectively, toward their self-defense.

What this Means for Iceland

So, what might all this mean for Iceland? It means that Iceland is not as isolated from these issues by geography as perhaps many would like to believe. Iceland's membership in the Schengen Area, and the free movement this provides between Iceland and much of the rest of Europe, mean that Iceland will need to reckon with these issues, just as other nations will. Prime Minister Gunnlaugsson acknowledged as much on Monday when he said, "We are looking at a different world and need to adapt."

It also means that Iceland will bear a cost, an increasing cost, as will every NATO member state, for its defense and security. Some of these costs are direct, such as committing to fulfill the Defense Investment Pledge made by our leaders at Wales. Iceland's first steps in this direction have been reflected in the budget bills submitted to the Althing since Wales. Some of the costs may be more indirect, such as the economic impacts of retaliatory sanctions.

I pause here for a moment to recognize, and to commend, the strong stand taken by Iceland, by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, in solidarity on the issue of sanctions, both before and since August 2015, when Russia imposed counter sanctions prohibiting import of Icelandic fish products. This move was designed to hurt Icelandic people, communities and companies, and fracture the Alliance. This should not happen.

In any event, whether the impacts are direct or indirect, no two member nations are affected in exactly the same way, but no nation is unaffected. Nations on NATO's eastern flank are subjected to daily broadcasts of Russian propaganda into their countries by Russian state-owned media outlets. And in fact over the past year, it is these countries on the eastern flank that have moved most clearly toward legislating their two percent and 20 percent defense spending commitments. The United States contributes approximately 70% of the NATO budget, though it represents only roughly 50% of the combined GDP of the 28 NATO member states. Other member states contribute equipment and hundreds, even thousands of troops to NATO missions. Every member of the Alliance contributes according to its capabilities. I encourage Icelanders to examine what costs they should bear for their security, and how that burden can be borne equitably by all its citizens. It's up to Icelanders to make those decisions.

Call to Conversation

The state of the world today presents many challenges to the rule of law, to peace and stability, and to the happiness which we all deserve and strive to achieve. That is the harsh reality, it is staring us right in our faces, and it means tough decisions lie ahead...for the U.S., for NATO, for the Nordics, and for Iceland. And so, as I conclude these remarks, I'd like to urge all Icelanders, not only those of you here in this room today, but also everyone who reads about or sees this speech at a later time, to participate in a national discussion about security. Have the conversation. Have the conversation amongst yourselves about Iceland's role and responsibilities in its own security and in North Atlantic and European security more broadly. How will Iceland as a whole bear the costs, economic and otherwise, of its collective defense commitments, in a changed and ever-changing security environment, especially if the costs fall disproportionately on particular geographic areas or sectors of Icelandic society? What will Icelanders accept, and what will you not accept? Have the conversation. I would further urge you -- take collective responsibility as citizens of this country to have the conversation. Do not, through lack of participation, make just a few people within your government responsible for these decisions.

Talk to your families, your children, your parents at the dinner table. Talk to your friends and your neighbors in the hot pots and the cafes. Talk to the youth of this country, whose future depends on decisions being considered and made today. And to the youth...talk back and make your voices heard. Have the conversation. Call on your elected representatives and those who seek election to clearly articulate their positions on Iceland's defense and security policies, so that you as voters can make informed decisions. Have the conversation. Will there be uncomfortable discussions, even heated disagreements? Undoubtedly. That is part of life in a free society. Have the conversation anyway. Only you as Icelanders can

determine your nation's future course regarding defense and security. I am hopeful, indeed confident, that Iceland and Icelanders will find a way to have that difficult conversation, to make the hard decisions, and to preserve what is unique here.

Takk fyrir.