



**THE NEW NORTH:  
A venue for US-Russian partnership  
in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

**An analysis presented  
by  
the President of Iceland  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson**

**Emory University  
Atlanta  
14 November 2003**

Nowhere did the Cold War so deeply freeze the political situation as in the North. The strategic arsenals, the nuclear confrontation, the ideological conflicts, the times of threats and crisis made the North a forbidden territory. The United States and the Soviet Union, the West and the East, confronted each other in the vicinity of Alaska and the Nordic countries.

The Cold War view of the world was often represented by the flat maps that hung in schoolrooms and the corridors of power where the North American and the European continents maintained the chief focus and the North and the Arctic somehow fizzled out at the top. Although centuries ago scientists had proven that the earth resembled a ball the political landscape had not yet recognised the polar neighbourhood in the North.

We now have a new political landscape, challenges and opportunities which provide us all with opportunities for progress and advancement that did not exist before.

For the first time in our history there now exists in the North an interlocked network of organizations embracing the entire area from Russia, across the Baltic States and the Barents Sea, through the Nordic countries, over the Atlantic Ocean and Greenland, into Canada and the United States of America.

Three international organizations – the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Baltic Council, all of them created in the last decade and all gaining relevance and scope with each passing year – are a clear demonstration of this political transformation, creating for the first time exclusive forums for cooperation between the Northern European states, Canada and the two most important states of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the United States of America and Russia.

Although these three international councils are all different in composition and purpose, they together constitute a new structural reality in the North. They show how the end of the Cold War has fundamentally altered the political and economic landscape in our regions. The federal structures of Russia, Canada and the United States have furthermore brought provincial and state governments into significant cooperative efforts with the smaller nation states in the North. Therefore an interesting form of regional and nation state cooperation on economic, social and political issues has been created. In many ways the area can now be seen as a laboratory model of how the old nation states and the regional, provincial and city governments within the federal structures

can evolve intensive forms of international cooperation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and thereby transform the old model of diplomatic exchange.

These developments have now been so successful that they have already created an elaborate political system which we could call “the New North” – an effective, broad and elaborate framework of cooperation that has been institutionalised on four levels.

The first level consists of the three councils of international cooperation: the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Baltic Council.

The second level consists of the Northern Forum, which embraces representatives of regions, cities and provinces – and facilitates cooperation across national boundaries.

The third level consists of the University of the Arctic – a network of over 50 universities and research institutions dedicated to creating and training an academic community devoted to furthering knowledge of the North.

The fourth-level consists of the Northern Research Forum, which first met in Iceland in the year 2000, then in Russia last year – and will assemble next year in Canada. The Northern Research Forum facilitates a continuous and open dialogue amongst scholars, researchers, public officials, political leaders, business entrepreneurs and cultural innovators, with special emphasis on giving young people access to the broad dialogue on the future of the North.

This four-level political system presents an elaborate framework for the New North. It is at the same time formal and well established, yet also dynamic, democratic and open – allowing innovation, new thinking and initiatives to facilitate positive change.

It is important for us to understand fully how this model of the New North offers us opportunities for effective cooperation and political innovation. It opens up new avenues for economic and social progress, as well as cultural enrichment and an inspired democratic dialogue. In this respect, the New North is unique in the world. No other part of the globe now enjoys such an elaborate and interconnected framework for cooperation – embracing regions that range from Asia to the Atlantic, from Alaska to the Nordic countries – bringing Russia and the United States together in a network of cooperation in the company of both new and old democratic states.

The core of the institutional framework in the New North is the emphasis on open dialogue and opportunities for participation by people

from far and wide. The New North is therefore, in global terms, uniquely democratic. The Northern Forum, the University of the Arctic and the Northern Research Forum allow citizens and scholars, students and activists in cities and regions to come forward with ideas, propositions, suggestions, projects and plans. And, through the connections to the formal councils of international cooperation – the Arctic, the Barents and the Baltic Councils – these democratic currents of reform reach the highest levels of decision-making. Political innovation in the North has – within a single decade – produced a framework for cooperation that offers us many opportunities for initiatives and progress. We are no longer hindered by the boundaries of the old diplomatic rules.

Within the New North everyone can work with everyone else: Alaska can work with the Nordic nations; regions in Russia can work with independent states in Northern Europe; universities and research institutions can work directly with state representatives in the Arctic and the Barents Councils; ideas and proposals formulated in the open NRF process are presented to ministers and ambassadors. The possibilities are unlimited, and it is up to us to demonstrate through our actions that we are fully utilizing the opportunities offered by the New North institutional framework.

It is worth noting that Alaska can in special and significant ways maximize the advantages created by the New North. Alaska is, in fact, the standard-bearer of the United States in northern cooperation and through Alaska's active involvement, the President and government in Washington are directly linked to the progress of the North. It is similar to how the Russian regions bring President Putin and Moscow into the decision-making process concerning the future of the North. Therefore, the New North framework is an important pillar in Russian-American relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Furthermore within the New North framework the United States and Russia have better opportunities to develop their cooperation and to become strong partners than in many other international forums. In the North only Canada and the Nordic countries are the additional players but the operations of other international frameworks are complicated by the presence of a different group of countries, as the recent history of disagreements within NATO and on Iraq, and the tension between the US and France and Germany so clearly demonstrates.

Through the North the United States can advance its relations with Russia and deepen a partnership which President Bush so clearly values without the complexities of having the continental European countries at

the table. The company of Canada and the Nordic countries is indeed conducive to achieving concrete results in the new US-Russian dialogue.

Let us look at some areas where leadership must be exerted in the coming years, areas of special importance mainly to the North, to the Arctic regions, but also areas of global significance and with potentially a strong impact in many parts of the world.

First: The North is as we know extremely rich in energy resources. It is one of the world's largest reservoirs of oil, gas and hydro and geothermal power. The management and utilisation of these resources is one of the most important future tasks in the North. Here the US through Alaska must offer both leadership and guidance, based on experience and inspired by the way how Alaska has formulated both a philosophy and public policies of how to harvest the commons for the benefit of the people and in order to maintain the sustainability of the resources.

Second: The development of the Northern Sea Route would link North –America, Europe and Asia in a new way and dramatically transform commerce, communication and business opportunities and create a new dimension in the global economy. Initiatives have already been taken in exploring the potential of this project and it is important to provide the necessary leadership in the coming years so the Northern Sea Route project will maintain the priority it deserves.

Third: The establishment of permanent air routes and the necessary aviation infrastructures in the North could become a strong pillar in the consolidation of the American-Russian relationship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and here Alaska together with the Russian regions must take the leading role. There is also a strong interest in this potential in my country since Icelandic airlines have been pioneers in Atlantic-European passenger traffic and in global cargo and specialised air transportation.

Fourth: The development of telecommunications and information technology in the North is an essential part of our future and here we can offer a wealth of experience. During its presidency of the Arctic Council, Iceland has given special emphasis to this subject and next October we will host in Iceland, under the auspices of the Arctic Council, an international conference on information and communication technology in the Arctic. The main purpose of the conference is to examine the use of information technology in the North and suggest practical ways of moving forward. The conference will also concentrate on two aspects in particular, telemedicine and distance education.

In addition to these four areas which all are of fundamental importance for the future of the North and of great global relevance, areas

which demonstrate the international significance of the North, let me also list briefly a number of other tasks and projects, issues and concerns.

Along with information technology, the main priority of the Icelandic presidency of the Arctic Council is the assessment of human development in the Arctic establishing an overview of sustainable development and identifying the factors that affect the well-being of the inhabitants. The focus will be on social, cultural and economical progress and how they relate to sustainable development and the use of natural resources in the region. The conclusions of this wide-ranging work will be submitted in the form of an Arctic Human Development Report.

We also intend to use the Arctic Council to strengthen scientific and technological cooperation for sustainable development through increased networking between scientists and research institutions. The aim is to build on existing international organisations and programmes, working with issues such as sustainable agriculture, communications, tourism, construction and the use of natural resources. We will also promote collaboration between funding agencies and research councils of the member states of the Arctic Council so as to facilitate joint financing of research programmes and projects. One focus will be to develop the existing cooperation between the European Union and North America in order to link educational and research institutions dealing with Arctic research. In addition, high priority will be given to strengthening circumpolar and cross-disciplinary monitoring to help us to determine and analyse environmental changes in the Arctic. The aim is increasingly to integrate monitoring of biodiversity and the assessment of pollution, climate change and other environmental and social and economic factors.

In the near future we should also give priority to the following:

- \*Economic progress through business partnerships, facilitated by investments in information technology and communications networks.
- \*The evolution of political systems in the North, including the strengthening of international councils such as the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Baltic Council, and extension of active cooperation between nation states in the regions and sub-state institutions such as provincial, local, regional and state governments in Canada, Russia and the United States. This cooperation across the boundaries of diplomatic protocol has provided a wealth of new opportunities in the North and in recent years has made the region a fascinating political laboratory.

- \*Legal issues concentrating on the rights of indigenous peoples, cultural and human rights and land ownership.
- \*The enhancement of cultural cooperation, including artistic exhibitions, musical events, film festivals, publishing and theatre, as well as the important task of language retention and the preservation of traditional patterns of social interaction.
- \*The growing importance of human health and the need to address the problems of suicide, homicide and inter-family violence.
- \*The impact of globalisation on the North, including the growing presence of multinational corporation and the critical role of the North for the global system.

The list could be longer, but these topics indicate a wealth of opportunities for constructive dialogue within the framework of the New North where the United States, Russia, Canada and the five Nordic countries – Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland – have committed themselves to constructive partnership in the coming years.

The times ahead do indeed offer us numerous opportunities, challenges and new avenues towards progress. It is highly encouraging to see how the nations of the North have moved swiftly to prepare themselves for this exciting future.

The North embraces the radical transformations that have taken place in international relations in recent years. It provides the global community with a new vision and creates a platform for North America and Russia to cooperate in a dynamic and positive way along with the smaller states of Northern Europe. In this respect the North paves the way towards the future, and is free of the problems and restraints that dominate attempts to create greater harmony in the central and southern parts of the European continent.

The North has become, in many ways, the laboratory of the new world – rich in initiatives for political, social and economic collaboration.

This outline shows the great change which has taken place in the North since the end of the Cold War, when all contacts had been completely frozen and absolute stagnation had prevailed for decades. Now there has been a thaw, much of the political ice has been broken and the rivers are surging forth, bringing a wealth of opportunities that were once unthinkable.