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The European Union's strategy of sustainable management for the Arctic

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Conference: Arctic Frontiers

Tromso, Norway, 19 January 2009

Ministers, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first of all thank you for your invitation to address this important conference. One could not have made a better choice for the venue of a conference called "Arctic Frontiers" than the gateway to the Arctic itself.

Arctic Frontiers seeks to forge new partnerships to bring together the worlds of science, art, policy-making and business. Furthermore, its work to reach out in particular to younger generations and transcend ethnic divides will help carry today's decisions through into tomorrow and beyond. These principles very much underpin my message to you today.

We are gathered here in Tromsø to examine the opportunities and challenges for the Arctic region. Yesterday I had the chance to experience the beautiful landscape of the area myself and to gain an insight into what it means to live north of the polar circle and so close to the Arctic. The Arctic, as we know, plays a key role in regulating the Earth's climate system. And because of this key role, the future of the Arctic and that of our planet as a whole are inextricably linked.

Last September, I attended an international conference hosted by the Nordic Council of Ministers in Greenland entitled "Common Concern for the Arctic". I came away from Greenland more convinced, than ever, of the pressing need for decisive action in the Arctic at an international level.

With its focus on how to strike the right balance between human activity and protection of the ecosystem in the Arctic, this conference is both welcome and timely.

The melting of the ice in the Arctic together with advances that have been made in modern technology means that this fragile region will become increasingly accessible to international shipping and those wishing to exploit the rich and abundant resources located there. While we cannot prevent this, we can make sure that shipping, fishing and the extraction of minerals in the Arctic is done in a sustainable manner, providing maximum protection to the people of the region and the unique environment in which they live.

The European Union has close historical and geographical links to the Arctic.

We are working hard to limit the damage caused by climate change and we promote environmental sustainability in various ways, in particular through research and concrete action. Yet in areas such as transport and fisheries, our actions have a direct bearing on the Arctic.

In turn, the changing face of the Arctic impacts upon European security, trade and the supply of resources.

The European Union's Integrated Maritime Policy works on the fundamental premise that each sea region is unique and needs individual solutions in order to maximise the sustainable use of resources. The Arctic is no different, and so it is in this respect, that the European Union has an interest in securing a sustainable future for the Arctic. More than that, the Union feels quite strongly that it would also be failing its citizens, and the world at large, if it did not take its responsibility in this regard.

The European Union has a clear vision of the path it would like to take with regard to the Arctic, in cooperation with its international partners. That is why the Commission proposed a European Union Strategy for the Arctic on 20 November.

In a nutshell, the aim of this Strategy is to promote the sustainable management of one of the last relatively unspoilt areas on Earth. It firmly establishes our commitment to the region and states our willingness to be an enthusiastic contributor towards preserving the Arctic's common heritage. This commitment is very firmly underlined by the desire to do this in partnership with others.

More specifically, our Arctic strategy focuses on three main policy objectives: protecting and preserving the Arctic together with its population; promoting the sustainable use of resources; and enhancing multilateral governance in the region.

With respect to our first objective, to protect and preserve the Arctic, we need to channel our efforts primarily into the management of the negative consequences of climate change and into preventing any further aggravation. The European Union is ready to work together with Arctic states, territories, NGOs and other stakeholders to promote high environmental standards and to develop an ecosystem-based approach to managing human activity in the region. Our experience of close co-operation between public authorities and local stakeholders in planning new developments has proven beneficial to all parties time and time again.

But sustainable management, and in more general terms, finding the right policy response for the Arctic Region is not just about environmental action. We are convinced that there are two important ingredients that will make the cocktail right.

The first is about taking into account the specific concerns and needs of indigenous communities and the local population and drawing on their unrivalled knowledge of the region.

Another ingredient for any sound policy response for the Arctic must be based on sound scientific data. With 86 million euros, the European Union is a major contributor to research activities of direct relevance to the Arctic. In addition, individual Member States also fund information-sharing in research and co-operation in areas such as long-term monitoring and surveillance.

Such funding would benefit greatly from partnerships between EU and non-EU countries. An initiative such as the proposed sustained Arctic Observing Network could have a key role to play here. I would like to salute, in particular, the pivotal role that Tromsø University plays in research activities, setting an example to others working in Arctic research.

The second objective of our strategy lies in promoting the sustainable use of resources and focuses on hydrocarbons, fisheries, transport and tourism. The prospects in these different fields vary. Some forms of Arctic tourism for example, especially cruise ship tourism, are already underway, while the future for transport in the region remains rather less clear.

Here I would emphasise our commitment to the principle of freedom of navigation. We support improved conditions for gradually introducing Arctic commercial navigation, as long as stricter safety and environmental standards apply. Indeed in all of the areas I have just mentioned, we must adopt the same approach of strong international cooperation, sustainability, strict adherence to environmental standards and full respect for the rights and interests of local communities.

This brings me to the third objective, namely enhanced governance. The challenges and opportunities facing the Arctic are international in nature. This means they can and must be tackled through concerted international action. We must turn our back on the divisions of the 20th century and make unity the watchword for the 21st century.

The main legal framework and tool for managing the Arctic Ocean and its resources is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS, which establishes the notion of a "common heritage of mankind". The Arctic Ocean therefore concerns not only its coastal states. Its sound management and the preservation of its resources is an obligation for all countries and signatories to UNCLOS.

We are convinced that an enhanced system of governance in the Arctic could prove to be a real asset. The European Parliament, which has consistently shown a keen interest in Arctic issues, recently highlighted the importance of Arctic governance. And the Council of the European Union has rightly stated that the EU's goals can be achieved only in close cooperation with all Arctic partner countries, territories and communities.

But we don't need to reinvent the wheel to build a governance system for the Arctic. Indeed, the structures we need for this, already exist.

We believe an UNCLOS-based governance system could deliver security and stability, strict environmental management and the sustainable use of resources subject to open and equitable access – precisely the aims contained in our strategy. In fisheries, we should examine sustainable stock management for the large areas of the Arctic Ocean, which are not covered by any such arrangements. One possibility for this would be extending the convention area of the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission, NEAFC, to cover the entire Arctic. As regards international navigation in the Arctic, I believe that the International Maritime Organisation will have an even more significant role to play.

Furthermore, the EU would like to enhance its input to the Arctic Council and also hopes to see progress on moves towards an integrated approach to maritime issues.

The reinvigorated Northern Dimension – which counts Norway among its valuable partners – is now earning its stripes as a vehicle for concrete action and cooperation. New and existing Northern Dimension partnerships have great relevance for Arctic cooperation.

The Arctic Council and the Northern Dimension are also important fora for dialogue with the United States and Russia. We look forward to closer cooperation with the United States within the Arctic Council and beyond. The very recent US Presidential Directive on the Arctic contains a policy with very similar objectives to our own, namely protecting the environment, ensuring sustainable use of natural resources, involving indigenous peoples, enhancing monitoring and conducting research. It furthermore recognises that the best way to address challenges and opportunities is through international cooperation.

We look forward to working together towards these common goals.

In the same vein, we will continue our dialogue with Russia as a strategic partner. We are indeed also eagerly anticipating the publication of its Arctic strategy at the end of this month.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Commission has been encouraged by the reaction to its Arctic strategy. As ever we welcome receiving feedback from all stakeholders in order to ensure any proposals are both useful and directly relevant.

I sincerely hope that the discussions over the next few days will generate new ideas and help us take a step further towards securing a healthy Arctic region for future generations to come.

Let me finish by quoting Henrik Ibsen: "A Community is like a ship, everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm".

If the Arctic is our ship then we must all take the helm to preserve its future.

Europe wants to contribute towards the sustainable development of the Arctic region while protecting it from environmental changes that result from increasing human activity. With that in mind, our message to you is clear. All of us in a position to make and influence policy must recognise the need to contribute to the decisive international action we need for the Arctic in order to preserve our common heritage.

Let us be bold and protect this precious region in the interest of our planet as a whole.

Thank you.