



The New Debate of Who Owns the Arctic is an Old One for Inuit

Address to the Ministerial Summit of Arctic Oceans

Agenda Item:

Issues relating to the local inhabitants and indigenous communities

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Mr. Chair, it is an honour to be addressing you on important Arctic matters. I thank you and Premier Enoksen for your kind invitation to have an Inuit voice present here.

Ministers, senior government officials, ladies and gentlemen:

The Inuit Circumpolar Council has been invited here, I presume, to give you insight into how Inuit are exploring the new question that others seem to be posing with increasing intensity. The new question and the debate that it has generated is an old one for Inuit. The new question of who owns the Arctic, especially its oceans, has generated a debate that is increasingly being played out among government officials, the media, academics, and even industry, which just can't wait to get its hands on the resources under the Arctic Ocean. While "ownership" is an uncomfortable concept for Inuit, it is a word we have to face today because others are asking it.

Today Inuit are being marginalized in this new debate by those who are now in control over our lands and seas.

In the past, it was Inuit who began the conversations. In each country in which Inuit are now living, we asked, pleaded, challenged, and demanded that our rights be acknowledged. Through these conversations, based on our basic rights to self-determination, Inuit started a process of land claims, home rule negotiations, wildlife management discussions, and resource sharing talks. Sometimes we took court action. The nature of these discussions varied across the Arctic.

While Inuit were not formally asked about the borders that have been created among us, we are nevertheless practical and believe in compromise. As such, we made peace with our colonizers through various means. We believe in pragmatic solutions.

In Greenland, we started the conversation and debate in the late 1960s which eventually resulted in negotiations leading to home rule in 1979. We continued with a new joint Greenlandic-Danish self-government commission which has recently finished its report. Greenlanders will vote November 25th this year on the further autonomy – dare I say sovereignty? – recommendations contained in that report.

In Canada, Inuit undertook four separate and sometimes parallel land claims negotiations which resulted in the creation of Nunavut, Nunavik, Nunatsiavut, and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region. In Alaska, Inuit there have undertaken several processes, the most notable one being the creation of the North Slope Borough. In Chukotka, Russia, we have not had the same degree of land claims negotiations, yet Inuit there have increasingly taken part in talks about self-government. These agreements must be respected in any talks among Arctic nations.

Yesterday's debate does not only begin with the various land claims processes in each country. It goes back to the time when the first foreign whaling ship came in the 1600s to hunt our big whales and decimate our stocks from which they have never recovered. It goes back to the time of the first missionary who came to Greenland in 1721 and *introduced* a new religion and *a new worldview*. It goes back to the time of the great polar expeditions of the 1800s and 1900s, when maps were being redrawn back in Europe to the east and America to the west.

It also goes back to 1933, when Greenlanders stated Greenland was indivisible by supporting Denmark's claim against Norway at the World Court, when it claimed East Greenland as theirs.

Yesterday's debate also contains some very unhappy stories of forced relocation. In 1953, Inuit of Nunavik were moved to the High Arctic, including Ellesmere Island, so that Canada could make a stronger claim for sovereignty there. This Ellesmere Island was known – and is still known by Inuit in Greenland as Umimmaat Nunaat. Umimmaat Nunaat was a place that our Inughuit hunted often, as was Sullualuk or “Lancaster Sound” which is today considered part of Canada's “northwest passage”. In the same year, the Inughuit of Uummannaq were forced out of their homes to make way for a Danish-supported American air force base, which is still there today. These same Inughuit paid dearly in other ways. They helped the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to travel in Ellesmere Island. They helped Robert Peary and many other American North Pole explorers publicly claim their victories, while they increasingly were told to stay within boundaries they never knew existed.

The now famous “Hans Island” bears the Danish name of a Greenland Inuk who as a member of the Polaris expedition in 1871 saved 19 of his colleagues in a daring rescue mission on the pack ice along the Davis Strait. The island's official Greenlandic name continues to be Tartupaluk. The Inuit of Russia paid with their lives during the protracted Cold War. There are many stories of forced relocations. Today, there is a “Novo” Chaplino, because the “Old” Chaplino was needed by the Soviet military to assert its sovereignty.

While yesterday’s debate was a very serious one, and had many implications for Inuit and others, today’s debate may in fact have even greater consequences. Marine transportation is sure to increase greatly, thereby threatening our environment and ecosystem – one we continue to use and live off of. Thousands of tourist ships are now navigating the Arctic waters travelling through wildlife refuges, frightening polar bears and other species. They do so without adequate emergency preparedness in the region. To address these and other needs, vast investments will be required. The USA is looking at using Barrow in the North Slope Borough area to build a new navy station. The list goes on.

Sovereignty is an interesting term. It means different things to different people, and to different countries. What I would like ministers and others here today to understand is that Inuit have their own definition of sovereignty. While we have been loyal servants to the Arctic states in the past, while we have started conversations of peace and co-existence with them despite the hardships we have endured, and while we have in fact promoted their own respective claims of sovereignty from time to time, it does not mean that we are merely pawns in the new debate.

In November of this year, Inuit from Russia, Alaska, Greenland, and Canada will be getting together in Kuujjuaq, Nunavik, Canada to discuss among themselves how we Inuit will collectively respond to the many forces – state, industry, and others – that are debating questions of ownership of our lands and seas without us having a meaningful voice. While I see Arctic powers attempting to make alliances with Inuit in their respective countries once again to argue their own case, I think this divide and conquer approach is not in the best interests of anyone. I will fight hard at the Inuit sovereignty summit in Kuujjuaq for a collective Inuit response.

New questions are being asked such as “who owns the Arctic?” We have a history that spans thousands of years across the Arctic that others now claim. This question is an old one for Inuit. While we are uncomfortable with the word “own”, I say it is all Inuit who “own” much of the Arctic, if I must use a non-Inuit word. And through ICC, Inuit will continue to voice this message loudly, clearly, and collectively.

Thank-you, Mr. Chair.