

Press Releases: Press Availability With Icelandic Foreign Minister Gudlaugur Thor Thordarson

Press Availability
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

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MODERATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland Gudlaugur Thor Thordarson, and Secretary of State – Secretary of State of the United States of America Mr. Mike Pompeo.

Minister Thordarson, please.

FOREIGN MINISTER THORDARSON: Thank you. Good afternoon, everybody, and thank you for coming to this press conference on the occasion of the visit of U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. Welcome.

Iceland and the United States have for decades enjoyed a very close relationship, a true friendship. Seventy-five years ago, in 1944, the United States was the first country to recognize the Republic of Iceland, which meant a lot during times of war, and we are still grateful. In fact, the United States entered the front line of World War II in Iceland six months prior to Pearl Harbor. Our countries are bound together by common heritage, but also principles and values, which continue to be tested as we talk together to face different regional and global threats, values that we need to uphold and protect.

The ocean also connects us, and today we discussed our continued good cooperation in the Arctic, as Iceland assumes the chairmanship of the Arctic Council in May. The sustainable development on ocean affairs (inaudible). As geographic changes in the high north of the Arctic becomes more accessible through alternative transportation routes, we need to enhance our cooperation even further – for example, in fields like search and rescue.

Iceland and the United States share strategic interests, and today we talked about the upcoming NATO ministerial meeting in Washington in April, where we will celebrate 70 years of successful transatlantic cooperation. Our

bilateral defense cooperation, which is based on our 1951 defense agreement, also stands on strong footing and continues to play both a security (inaudible). The decades-long presence of U.S. Armed Forces in Iceland left a lasting cultural legacy. People sometimes ask me if Iceland is a European state. I guess the academic answer is yes, but when you really think about it, we literally belong to Europe and North America as the continental divide runs straight through our country, and I believe that this continental divide is reflected in the nation's heart and soul. We are more American than other Europeans.

In a sense, we are a transatlantic nation, which brings me to trade and our people-to-people connections. The United States is Iceland's largest bilateral trading partner. The U.S. travelers are the single largest group of visitors to Iceland. Last year, some 700,000 U.S. tourists visited Iceland, or twice the size of our population, reflecting the relationship and frequent-flier connections between our countries.

There is, however, still unrealized potential for trade in our commercial relationship, and today we decided to establish an economic dialogue between Iceland and the United States to advance our bilateral economic cooperation further. The economic dialogue will include bilateral discussions between government officials, but also private sector, with the goal of boosting bilateral trade, investment, and importantly, private sector ties.

Mr. Secretary, dear Mike, thank you for a fruitful meeting and visiting Iceland. I look forward to the continued cooperation and friendship between Iceland and the United States.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you very much. Good afternoon, everyone. I want to thank Prime Minister Jakobsdottir and Foreign Minister Thordarson for hosting me today. I greatly appreciate it. It was a great working lunch. We had a wonderful conversation. We recounted some of the remarkable history between our two countries, and I look forward to seeing the prime minister here in just a little bit. It's the first time I've had the opportunity to come to Iceland, but it feels very familiar. Many of you won't know this, but before my time in government service, I founded a small business in Kansas, so I have a special appreciation for entrepreneurs and people like those here, and for people who strive to be, as Icelanders like to say, *best i heimi*. Our two nations do share just a wonderful and important history, and our people should never forget that. Your explorers ventured across the centuries before we were even a country. Now tens of thousands of more – our adventurous tourists love to come here and visit. I saw them on my drive in. The flow of people is now going the other way; we're coming here.

During World War II, this nation granted our American convoys aid to help Britain access to your ports, and our Apollo astronauts trained here. We're proud to be the first country that recognized Iceland diplomatically, now 75 years ago. I congratulate you on 75 years of full independence. As a founding member of NATO, Iceland makes important contributions. We were delighted you hosted the successful first phase of the Trident Juncture exercise this past fall in October, and we certainly appreciate the key role that you play in securing sea lines of communications both between Europe and North America.

And the economic relationship between our two countries remains strong. We definitely hope we can make it stronger. The United States recently became Iceland's largest single trading partner, and as you'd spoken about, we have now established an economic dialogue between our two nations which I think will bear fruit quickly next year but in the years and decades ahead as well. It will strengthen the bilateral ties between our two countries by connecting government and private sector stakeholders from both countries.

There will always be challenges. We can't take any aspect of our relationship for granted. There hasn't been a U.S. secretary of state come here since 2008. I just spent four days in Central and Eastern Europe visiting capitals that had been neglected under the prior administration as well. No more. No more will we take our friends, our true allies, our partners for granted. We simply can't afford to neglect them. Our economies are too closely tied.

We also seek a real partnership with you on the Arctic, a region that is increasingly strategically important, and we look forward to working with you on Arctic issues as you assume the chairmanship of the Arctic Council this coming May.

We know that when America retreats, nations like China and Russia will fill the vacuum. It's inevitable if we are not there. In 1986, you hosted the pivotal summit between President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev that was the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union. Today we remain proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with Iceland in a strong transatlantic community that we have now built. We're old friends facing new challenges, and I am confident we'll tackle them together. And I'm delighted to be here too and to take questions. Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. Now we have time for two questions from the journalists, one from an Icelandic reporter and another from traveling press. The first question goes to Stefan Rafn Sigurbjoernsson from Channel 2 News, Stod 2, in Iceland. Stefan, please.

QUESTION: Thank you. Welcome to Iceland, Mr. Secretary.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you.

QUESTION: My question is for both the Secretary and the minister. It's about Icelandic-U.S. relations in terms of trade and defense. Could you please elaborate further on the economic dialogue and what it means for the future? Is this a first step toward something like a free trade partnership? Do you see any obstacles like EU regulations, for example, if that were a possibility in the future? And in terms of security, how do you see U.S. role in the Arctic with the ever-increasing military presence of Russia in the region? Do you see a more active role including Iceland? Do you see more military deployment or maybe reopening of bases? Thank you.

SECRETARY POMPEO: So, if I may – may I tackle it first?

FOREIGN MINISTER THORDARSON: Yeah.

SECRETARY POMPEO: First with respect to the economic dialogues, we think

they're important for multiple reasons. The first is it is always important to get private sector actors talking to each other to educate them about opportunities there are to trade with other nations. And so that will be a central part of what we try to accomplish, making sure that American businesses understand the opportunities that exist here and companies from this country seeing markets and opportunities in the United States as well.

But second, and you mentioned this, we think also that better understanding puts us in a better place to come to even more cooperative trade relations between our two countries. And whether they'll ultimately be fulfilled through a formal trade agreement – which, if we can accomplish, would be a really good outcome – or whether they simply come from a set of common understandings where we reduce cost, reduce friction, reduce barriers to entry for our companies to work inside the other countries, that will be a good thing as well.

As for the security issues, the United States deeply understands the strategic – geostrategic challenges that exist in the Arctic, the risks that are there. And we've watched America's adversaries begin to deploy assets in a way that they believe will strategically disadvantage not only the United States but Iceland and the European countries as well.

And so what the form of that effort will take I think remains to be determined, but I am very confident that America and Iceland working together will achieve outcomes. And I look forward to being part of this as Iceland takes over the Arctic Council of determining how and where best to deploy assets – not simply military assets but all of the assets, the enormous advantages that we have by being democracies, rule-of-law countries, all of the things that have made us strong for all these years – to ensure that the Arctic doesn't become a threat to those very values.

FOREIGN MINISTER THORDARSON: Thank you. First, when you talk about trade relations, of course they are good, but we can always, always improve. And I think that we take the best things when it comes to the European cooperation. We are part of EEA and being part of EEA means that we are not a part of the customs union. So it means that we can make a free trade deal with every nations or which we want, and we have done so.

We also look at free trade as a very important thing and want to look in a constructive way, but you were mentioning the technical barriers, which is, of course, a threat to free trade. But we – I think we need to look into it in a constructive way. We are a pure example – Iceland – of the importance of free trade. We are probably one of the poorest nations in Western Europe a hundred years ago. Now we are one of the richest.

The reason – one of the reasons – and we would never be where we are if we wouldn't have access to other markets and our markets wouldn't be open. So that's the basic idea, and I am very pleased that we have today the words of the Secretary and also that we are excited to take this important step. And I think it's right that we should try to do it as quickly as possible because, at the end, it's a really – it's a rather simple thing if you have – if you look at it in a constructive way. But I think it's important that we start

the dialogue, we start the work, and then we will see the outcome. But of course, we would like to see closer trade relations with the U.S., and a free trade deal, of course, is something that we are looking for.

When it comes to the Arctic and the security and defense, that we have a very clear strategy – Iceland – when it comes to the Arctic. We want to see it sustainable not only when it comes to the environment but also economically and socially. There are 4 million people who live in the Arctic, and we have to think about their needs and their will when it comes to the area. And also it's very important that we see Arctic in the near and distant future as a peaceful, low-tension area. So that's what we are aiming for, that's what we will be discussing, and that's what we will work with the U.S. and other partners to see that it will happen.

And also, because you mentioned Russia, that's another among the nations that we have worked very closely together on when it comes to the Arctic. And Arctic has been so far, and hopefully in the near and distant future, an area which every partner who are involved, especially in the Arctic Council, agree on the importance of seeing the Arctic as a low-tension, peaceful area where you have the rule of law. And long may it continue, and we will do everything we can to achieve that.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Another question from the international media. Lesley Wroughton from Reuters, please.

QUESTION: Good afternoon, or is it afternoon? I can't remember. Just to get to some news of the day, please, Mr. Secretary, Venezuela's Maduro has invited Elliott Abrams, the special envoy, to Caracas for talks. Do you think this is a signal to the U.S. that he is looking for a way out? And will you, in fact, send Special Envoy Abrams to Caracas? First question.

The second one is: You spoke earlier about increased presence of China and Russia in the Arctic region. How does the U.S. hope to counter that? And also, what does the U.S. hope to gain from being back in operation at the airbase, the Reykjavik airbase? Why is it important to the U.S. and to Iceland to have a U.S. presence there?

SECRETARY POMPEO: As for Venezuela, Lesley, you've traveled with me before. You're asking me to comment on something we're going to do in the future, and I have steadfastly and consistently refused to tell anyone what our strategy is with respect to achieving our end-state goal for Venezuela, which is getting the outcome for the Venezuelan people that they so richly deserve, while this man, Maduro, has created a humanitarian crisis that is unequalled in a nation where there was no armed conflict. And we as soon as this weekend will continue to deliver massive humanitarian assistance. We hope that Mr. Maduro will allow that into his country.

The fact that he has publicly said he wants to talk with the United States is not new, but I think it demonstrates his increasing understanding that the Venezuelan people are rejecting him and his model of governance and that the interim president, Mr. Guaido, is both constitutionally the leader of that country and, importantly, will lead Venezuela and the Venezuelan people

towards free and fair elections which will determine a way forward for Venezuela which will put the Venezuelan people in a much better place and on a path towards economic recovery that they so richly deserve.

Your second question about how do you counter China and Russia, one of the first things you do is you find friends and allies who are in the region, and you work alongside them, and you show up, and you have serious discussions with them about how best to approach it. We have laid out in the National Security Strategy how the United States thinks about it during this administration, and there are multiple elements to it, not the least of which is working with our allies inside of the Arctic Council to develop precisely the right strategy so that, as the foreign minister said, a peaceful, low-tension environment exists. And we're prepared to devote American resources to achieving that.

And then your third question was about the American presence. We welcome the invitation to be here to do what is important work that our military is doing here. It is aimed squarely at the very mission that your previous question referred to, ensuring that safe transit, open rule-of-law of waterways continue to exist in this very important, very central, geostrategically central location that I'm standing in today.

FOREIGN MINISTER THORDARSON: Well, thank you. When it comes to Venezuela, then you all know about the situation. I think what we are hoping – and I think it's very good that like-minded nations have put pressure on Maduro to hold democratic elections, which, of course, is very important. I think I don't need to describe to Mr. Secretary (inaudible) a few years – a few words about the situation. This is, of course, really, really serious, and I hope that this is a sign of good things, but to be honest, I don't know.

When it comes to bilateral relations on defense and security and our membership in NATO, it's always the same – or same aim: We want to see peace, especially in this part of the world, and of course, in the world as a whole. That's the reason we joined NATO in the first place. That's the reason we made the bilateral agreement between us and the U.S. And lower tension means that we don't need to do as much, but unfortunately, things have changed a bit since 2014, as we all know, and – but we will hope that we will see change in another direction in the future. But as we speak, then the situation is as it is.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Minister Thordarson. I would also like to thank you all for your questions.

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