

Free at last

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On the 30th of September 2006 for the first time in its history as an independent nation, Iceland was free of all foreign military forces or their representatives. A quiet and almost unnoticed ceremony took place at the Keflavik NATO base. American and Icelandic flags were lowered, folded, given to representatives of the respective countries and the small official party drove away. Quietly, with no fanfare or demonstration, or even much notice, the Keflavik base, the focal point of an issue that roiled and divided Iceland politics like one of the fire trenches that mark the country, an issue that had simmered and erupted throughout most of the Cold War, became a ghost town.

Iceland remains in NATO but alone among the now 26 member nations Iceland has no military of its own nor does it now even have forces from another alliance country on its soil. The nearest NATO forces that could provide help are 600 miles away in the UK. Realistically, these British forces, now at a total of 80,000 for all services and still in decline, can hardly be expected to deploy, even if they were able, to aid their distant sometime adversary and alliance partner. To be sure, both the US and Icelandic governments insist that the 1951 Defense Agreement is still operative and that instead of fighters at Keflavik there is a new and mostly secret arrangement that involves periodic exercises of US military forces in Iceland and communications plans between the countries in the event of crisis. A mostly secret arrangement or *entente* such as Britain and France had on the eve of World War I may be reassuring to some in the respective governments but a largely unexplicated agreement can cause problems. Iceland's negotiators labored hard to get what they could but in spite of their best efforts that may prove to be little enough.

Without fighter aircraft is Iceland defenseless as Prime Minister David Oddson suggested at ceremonies marking the 50th anniversary of the 1951 Defense Agreement in Reykjavik in 2001? Does this new Agreement provide an equally sufficient defense for Iceland? Or, as one government official sardonically put it, has a "visible and credible" deterrent been replaced by one that is invisible and incredible? The answer to such questions is multi-faceted but depends greatly on two particular factors. First, how much can such an agreement, most of whose provisions are to be taken on faith, do now that physically present F-15 fighter aircraft (and their companion rescue helicopters) used to do? Second, and ultimately more important, just what sort of threats is Iceland facing or likely to face? For instance, are the threats, if any, such that even if the fighter aircraft were still here they might prove irrelevant?

Of course defense plans must keep operational details secret. But if they are to do more than coordinate forces and military activities, in other words reassure the population to be defended and serve as warning notice to those who might wish to pose threats to security, then some public if general statement of when and under what circumstances the plans will go into operation is necessary. This new Agreement, whose existence but not substance has been disclosed, must also be seen in the context of the many US force reductions elsewhere in the world. Equally important, there has been a dramatic shift away from almost any notion of territorial defense as the (US) National Security Strategies of 2002 and 2006 reveal. Under such circumstances, just what is it that such an agreement can and cannot do?

Agreements whose provisions are not spelled out may keep a potential adversary guessing as to exactly what alliance partners will do for each other and under what circumstances. Most strategic thinkers agree that denying any element of certainty to a potential aggressor is useful in deterring aggression in the first place. Such agreements also conceal unequal relationships or unequal commitments and conceal the presumed benefits and costs from skeptics and those who would oppose any treaty arrangement in the first place. On the domestic front or fronts, non-recorded agreements also tend to keep what may be contentious issues out of the public political discourse. On a more Machiavellian note, they are eminently deniable, often to the dismay of one of the parties.

It is equally important to note what this kind of agreement cannot do. Although it may keep a potential adversary guessing and thereby promote deterrence, it can equally suggest that no meaningful agreement exists in the first place, rather that there is an attempt to create an impression of more substance than is the case. Deterrence, after all, does require some communication of exactly what one wishes to deter. If military necessity dictates certain obvious courses of action when two or more parties are to assist each other in some security arrangement, then secrecy is mostly an obstacle to coherently worked out planning for all who must participate. Consider Germany and Austria on the eve of World War I. Their security arrangements were secret but virtually everyone else knew enough of the general intentions and even of Germany's famous Schlieffen Plan that counter-balancing plans could be and were made. All secrecy did then was insure that the Schlieffen Plan

never got looked at by enough objective planners on the German General Staff (instead of just by its advocates). Its political miscalculations and unrealistic demands on army capabilities went uncorrected. Agreements whose conditions are not disclosed are also much less likely to reassure interested populations that their security needs are being addressed. This is especially true if the major security guarantor has, for whatever reason, a lessened reputation for abiding by such commitments elsewhere.

Certainly one of the most fundamental questions about this new Agreement between the US and Iceland must be just what does it do for Iceland that membership in NATO, by itself, does not do? The 1951 Defense Agreement, still in effect, at least nominally, was designed to deal with the impacts of foreign troops upon a newly independent state. Specifically, it referred to size of the forces, their composition, what areas of the country would be used, and, by strong implication, the question of stationing nuclear weapons in Iceland, a question that had been at the heart of Nobel laureate Halldor Laxness's novel, *Atom Station*. Since all the foreign forces are now gone those particular questions are moot and this circumstance, in turn, calls into question the continuing relevance of the 1951 Agreement.

Presumably the new Agreement would call for the dispatch of NATO forces to or near Iceland if there were to be a security threat of some kind that needed the presence of military forces. But even the most cursory reflection will show two problems with the worth of such an understanding. First, as Alexander George and other students of coercive diplomacy have amply demonstrated, introducing forces into an area in crisis where there had been none before is very different from adding to forces already present in the region. A move introducing forces simply heightens the crisis. Such would be the case if the US or some other NATO country were to send forces back to Iceland if a crisis arose or threat was perceived [but of course there is the question of which party makes this determination].. Even more challenging to the idea of the worth of this new agreement that replaces the F-15s is the conditions under which such an agreement would be operable. Consider the likelihood of any threat to Iceland needing the interposition of US forces that would not also somehow involve a threat to Norway or the UK. If such were the case, which countries of these three would have first call on such forces? Norway and the UK already have their own military forces with which new forces could immediately integrate. They both have existing headquarters capability to make the most effective use of additional forces. Most fundamentally, they have developed and vetted operations plans and doctrine that could make most rational use of such forces. How does Iceland compare in any of these areas? How would US planners likely decide what would be the most efficient use of whatever forces they send out, i.e., which country would get them first? The new Agreement seems to raise questions as much as it reassures.

Perhaps serious consideration of what the New Agreement might or might not entail is beside the mark anyway. It would be idle to concern oneself about a defense arrangement if circumstances indicate that there is little likelihood that one will need a traditional defense in the first place. This leads then to consideration of what threats Iceland may now face and whether or not the withdrawal of fighter planes has really had much of an impact on Iceland's security in today's circumstances. While a recent appearance of Russian "blackjack" bombers conducting a missile firing exercise in Iceland's air defense zone was a reminder that remnants of the once mighty Soviet military arsenal still exist, the relative rarity of such exercises also reminds one of how much has changed since the height of the Cold War when flights like these were an almost daily occurrence. Certainly defense of the state's territory from outside attack does not have the priority it did a quarter of a century ago. Perhaps it was time for the fighters to leave Keflavik anyway. In some sense, the absence of military forces in Iceland is testimony to a policy that worked. NATO did deter or, at least did not fail to deter, the often proclaimed aggressive intent of its major adversary. Now it seems to be time to move on. For that matter, conquest of territory isn't what it used to be and, as Israel is learning, even conquest of territory that has a plausible strategic rationale comes at a very high price. Still, as an arch-realist like John Mearsheimer points out, world leaders are almost invariably realists so it is likely to remain a realist world for some time to come. This means that expansionist or would-be domineering states won't go away anytime soon either. Realistically, the possibility of a threat to the territory of Iceland or even a military attack upon it seems as remote as it does for most of the other developed states in the world but it still exists. There are more serious threats, but they lie elsewhere.

As one example of the new kinds of security threats with which countries must deal, consider immigration. Several years ago there was a NATO North Atlantic Council meeting in Reykjavik

centered on the theme of “Emerging Strategic Imperatives in the High North.” In truth, there weren’t any. Instead the bulk of the discussion was the threat, as perceived by southern members of the Alliance, posed by unchecked immigration from African, East European, and Middle Eastern lands. Even though Iceland has one of the highest birth rates in Europe, it too will need an even greater influx of foreigners to maintain a workforce that will maintain the country’s very high standard of living. As the earlier NATO conference suggested and as a recent article by Fiona B. Adamson in *International Security* details, international migration may be the source of the more important security threats advanced nations face today.

Immigrants (those not living in their own countries and not yet naturalized as citizens of countries in which they reside and work) as a factor in world affairs constitute a very rapidly growing body of people in the world. Were they to comprise a state by themselves, it would be the world’s fifth most populous. Adamson finds three dimensions of security threat from immigrants. First, unchecked migration can threaten a state’s very autonomy and capacity to function as a sovereign entity by flooding it with immigrants it can neither care for nor control. Second, immigrants in sufficient numbers can change a balance of power between neighboring or contending states by providing one of the dyad with a surplus of resources, i.e., people, with which it can advance interests against another state. Third, and most relevant to Iceland, is the nature of violent conflict in today’s world. Immigrants may bring with them the conflicts, revanchism, and hatreds that festered in their native lands and which may indeed have been the primary reason for their migration.

To date Iceland has not had such problems but there is no guarantee that Iceland will be spared the sort of troubles that have already begun to affect the other Nordic nations. Moreover, even without their actually emigrating, per se, bloody-minded members of disaffected groups in very remote parts of the world can reach anywhere, an unwanted but unavoidable consequence of globalization. Conversely, such unhappy immigrants could cause trouble not in Iceland but from Iceland. How well is the country prepared for that? Iceland may seem remote from troubled areas like the Basque region, the Middle East, Sri Lanka, Bali, and all the other places terrorists choose to leave their deadly messages but can that always last? Even though Usama bin Laden, for example, says he has no desire to strike Sweden, Iceland’s utter defenselessness may overcome its remoteness in calculations some terrorists, somewhere, may make in deciding where to strike next for maximum affect and attention. As one expert has noted, terrorists don’t necessarily want a lot of people dead, they want a lot of people watching. Nor can we think of security threats any longer in just state-centered terms. Security threats can affect the range of humankind from individuals, to the state, to regions, to the whole community of nations itself.

With the Americans gone, to return only when some undisclosed threshold of danger is reached, what is Iceland to do in the meantime? It seems evident that Iceland must on its own make an assessment of what security threats it might face, an assessment that needs continually to be revisited, and then determine what resources it has or must develop in order to meet those threats. In short, Iceland has to come up with its own strategy for dealing with a troubled world. This may seem a daunting task for a nation which has never had its own military force and whose language doesn’t even have a root word for strategy. Other Nordic countries have such capacities and it is well with Iceland’s capabilities to do so as well. In fact there is a recent and successful Icelandic precedent for fashioning its own strategic calculus for security matters. That precedent is the Öryggssimálanefnd (Commission on Security and International Affairs) whose existence from 1979 to 1992 manifested credible and sophisticated thinking on the security environment in which Iceland then found itself.

During its brief existence, Öryggssimálanefnd produced a considerable body of studies, data, and assessments of security matters relating to the concerns of the bi-polar superpower world in which it found itself inextricably embedded. In a collateral effort, it also produced word lists so that Icelanders could in public and parliamentary debate discuss such matters without recourse to arcane and foreign terms only specialists were likely to know. If it had only done this it would have well served its charter but there was a significant additional effect of this Althing-established Commission. Heretofore, defense affairs had been the province of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) and there were, at best, modest excursions in the Ministers Annual Report to Althing about security matters. Moreover, these sections of the report tended to reflect Washington’s thinking in virtually all cases. The existence of Öryggssimálanefnd and its activities in short order led to what was essentially a dialectic between it and the MFA. As more material, opinion surveys, case analyses, and so on came forth, the Minister’s Report correspondingly grew longer and more detailed. By the mid 1980s, the

Minister's Report had grown from about a dozen to 85 pages and was published with a simultaneous official English translation. A security discourse that was essentially Icelandic had been inaugurated. As this episode demonstrates, this kind of discourse can be done again and this time perhaps receive even more widespread currency. Certainly any serious threat analysis and response by Iceland to perceived security needs must begin with such discourse.

It must be made clear that this ought not to be a policy-making body. That responsibility already exists and properly belongs with the Ministries and the Althing. Some have even suggested creation of something like a Ministry of Defense. To this latter suggestion there are two major objections. First, such a body would be so dramatic a departure from Iceland's historical and cultural experience that any effort to form such a body would likely cause a storm of contention and opposition that would obscure and set back any effort to fashion any kind of security "think tank" or study agency. Second, if this new body were to be a new government agency or even part of an existing government agency, its credibility would eventually be swallowed by the partisan politics that are necessary to any democracy. The sort of body being recommended should be outside government yet still closely associated with it. If it is not to be a policymaking body, neither ought it to be a conduit for the policy views of whatever party or parties control the government. Academics should not be expected to make policy and policy makers should not be expected to make long view objective assessments of determine what is true or factual.

The sort of think tank being proposed, for that's what is meant here, must take into account and seek representation from all segments of society even as the nature of security itself is now understood to encompass individuals within the state and regions in which the state exists, as well as the state itself. Government of course must be part of such an enterprise, but business, political parties, the Church, movements and non-governmental organizations, representatives from corresponding institutions in other countries, especially the Nordics or small states, must also be part of the mix. For this reason such a think tank should be located in academia which does or is supposed to provide the right atmosphere for objective consideration of the widest range of factors in dealing with any problem confronting society. Such a body located in academia would also be able to take a longer term view of things than either government or business can rightly be expected to do. One thing is certain, Iceland clearly has the human talent in academia to form the necessary core of a credible and relevant think tank that government and business and other sectors of society can contribute to and in turn draw on.

In thinking about security, as the empty hangars at Keflavik now attest, Iceland more than ever needs to think for itself. To promote and sustain objective and long-term thinking about security in all its complexity in today's world there must be a body where such thinking is the very purpose, indeed the sole purpose, of the body. Whatever it can be called, whatever its exact composition, it must stand apart from but be involved with other segments of society which have other and more immediate purposes and requirements. To begin developing an autochthonous security policy which must necessarily precede any appropriate measures and responses to security threats, as Icelanders see them, there must be an informed and comprehensive discourse on security. An academic think tank is the place to start. The Americans have gone. They may come back if needed but, as we can see, they may have enough problems of their own. They might not even have what is needed to face a security threat that is particular to Iceland. Immigration was mentioned earlier as one category of problem but pollution, energy, the environment, and so on may all emerge singly or in combination as security matters in a way that is unique to the country. Iceland needs its own answers.