Mr Chairman, distinguished speakers, ladies and gentlemen,

If the rest of the world is hot from climate change, the Arctic region is burning. In the Arctic surface temperatures are rising twice as fast as in the rest of the world. Over the past decades, sea ice has been thinning and retreating to record lows of ice surface. The melting of the ice poses unprecedented ecological risks, but at the same time new opportunities open up for mankind in transport, trade, fisheries, oil and gas drilling. These opportunities make the Arctic the ‘new frontier’ in economic and political terms.

This dichotomy between economic opportunities and environmental risks is the challenge the international community is facing today. This dichotomy overwhelms all actions of mankind. From the exploitation of resources in North Africa to the disaster in Japan there is clearly the same dilemma that ancient Greek tragedies faced: man against nature. The winner we already know.

So the Arctic will test our ability to work together and our willingness to put environmental protection, sustainability and public safety first. It will show whether we have understood – or not – that all we have is one planet after all. The message I bring to you today is that it must be possible to reap the economic benefits opening up in the Arctic while at the same time preserving the environment from further damage. Let us not forget that the people living in the Arctic must benefit from the process too: their way of life, their heritage and their livelihoods are at stake.

* European Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries.
Since 2008 we have been formulating a coherent and comprehensive policy to tackle the ever growing challenges of the Arctic region. Our purpose is threefold: Firstly, we want to bring a decisive contribution to preserving the Arctic region, in unison with the people of the Arctic. Secondly, we want to make sure that the emerging industrialization and exploitation of Arctic resources follow the highest environmental and safety standards, with fair access and treatment to European Union (‘EU’) citizens and businesses. Thirdly, and following logically from the other two, we want closer and enhanced international cooperation in the Arctic region.

Our priorities and our approach are very similar to those advocated by the Arctic States, which undeniably have a primary responsibility. The competences of the Arctic coastal States, as laid down by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, are undisputed. The Arctic Council which is the main platform to exchange knowledge and best practices on the region’s challenges has a fundamental role to play in Arctic cooperation. We already attend its working groups on a case-by-case basis and we hope to do so on a permanent basis in the future. The EU presence under the status of permanent observer can advantage all the parties. Let me show how you, by referring to our work, till now.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The EU is a world leader in the fight against climate change and promotes environmental sustainability through reform, research and concrete initiatives. A successful policy to mitigate climate change will naturally also benefit the Arctic area and its people. A report published in January 2011 and funded by the EU studies the consequences of European activities in nine areas, such as biodiversity, transport, energy and climate change. It shows that our impact is significant: for example, 24% of mercury depositions and 42% of sulphur dioxide emissions to the Arctic come from the Union! So, we are aware of our share of responsibility. We intend to work for environmental protection and sustainable development – for example to come to good safety standards for polar vessels or for oil and gas exploitation.

We want concrete projects delivering concrete results. This is why in the last decade the European Commission has spent € 200 million on Arctic research projects which focus on key areas such as sea ice retreat-

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