

Opening Ceremony

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Minister for Foreign Affairs of Denmark



Speech

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, members of the International Bar Association, welcome to Denmark. And welcome to Copenhagen.

It is a great pleasure to open the Annual Conference of the International Bar Association and to welcome some 3,500 lawyers from across the world.

I have to admit that standing in front of so many lawyers is slightly intimidating. Even for a politician. But I can claim at least some connection to this audience. I graduated from the University of Copenhagen with a degree in law. And for quite a long time, I was convinced that I was going to become a lawyer.

Life took a different turn. I ended up making laws rather than practising them. But my legal education has stayed with me throughout my political life. Because law teaches you something useful: When the world becomes complicated, separate the issues. Understand the principles. Understand the facts. And work out what follows.

And the world is certainly complicated at the moment. So let me begin with something that I suspect has been on quite a few minds recently when they hear a Danish Foreign Minister speak about international law: Greenland. Less than two weeks ago, Greenland, Denmark and the United States reached an agreement regarding defence and security in the Arctic – an agreement with Greenland, not about Greenland. That matters for the Kingdom of Denmark. For the United States. For NATO and European security. And for our common security in the Arctic.

It is about strengthening the broader security architecture that binds Europe and North America together. An architecture built on strong alliances and shared responsibilities. But today, in this room, I want to emphasise another dimension. The agreement demonstrates something fundamental: Even when interests are significant, disagreements are real and security concerns are pressing, diplomacy based on international law can deliver results.

Let me take you behind the scenes for a moment. This agreement did not come together overnight. When I travelled to Washington earlier this year, we decided to establish a high-level working group. That meeting helped set the work in motion – work that has since required dialogue, difficult discussions and persistent diplomacy.

Throughout this process, three principles have been fundamental to the position of the Kingdom of Denmark: Sovereignty. Territorial integrity. And the right to self-determination of the Greenlandic People.

These are not Danish inventions. They are fundamental principles of international law. And standing firmly on those principles gave us a solid foundation for diplomacy. It also resonated far beyond Denmark and Greenland. I felt that very clearly at the UN General Assembly last week. There were many congratulations – not only from my European colleagues, but from colleagues from across the world.

And I know that there are quite a few American lawyers here today. To you, I would say this: History binds us together. Greenland, Denmark and the United States. And now we have taken responsibility for ensuring that it continues to do so in the future. I think there is a lesson in that. International law is sometimes presented as something that restricts states. I see it differently.

My message today is simple: International law is the framework that allows states to cooperate. Denmark was among the founding members of the United Nations in 1945. And of NATO in 1949. And our commitment to the principles of the UN Charter remains as strong today as it was then.

Because we know that international cooperation depends on more than shared interests. It depends on shared rules. All of you who are present here today can stand tall and sharpen your pencils. The world needs your expertise, your persistence and the principles you bring to the table.

Today, we need that framework of international law more than we have for a very long time. Because the basic principles of the international order are under pressure. Nowhere is that clearer than in Ukraine. For more than four years, Ukraine has defended itself against Russia's full-scale aggression. Denmark's position has been clear: An attempt to acquire the territory of another country through force has no place in Europe. And no place anywhere else in the world.

The principle is straightforward: Borders cannot simply be changed by military force. And that principle cannot depend on who is violating it. International law loses its meaning if we defend it only when it is politically convenient. That is also why Denmark remains critical of Israeli settlements that undermine the prospect of a two-state solution. While at the same time recognising Israel's right to exist as a state. The world does not come in black and white. It is full of colour. I learned that as a law student. And I have certainly learned it as a politician. But complexity does not make principles less important. Quite the opposite. Especially in a world that has become more dangerous. But adapting to that world cannot mean abandoning the rules designed to make it less dangerous.

International law is not an alternative to security. It is part of our security. For a small country like Denmark, that is obvious. But frankly, it should be obvious to larger countries as well. Because a world governed only by power is less predictable. Less stable. And ultimately less prosperous for everyone.

When I look back at my own legal education, there is something else that has stayed with me. The rule of law can sound terribly abstract. Especially when politicians talk about it. And probably also when lawyers talk about it... No offence. But in reality, it is deeply practical. It is the confidence that a contract will be respected. That a court will make its decision independently.

That you can challenge a decision made by your government. And that the rules do not suddenly change depending on who you are. That is also why my party, the Moderates, has fought for a new reform of the Danish justice system. To ensure equal access to legal assistance. Because access to justice should not depend on the size of your bank account. It should be there for everyone.

In Denmark, the rule of law is also closely connected to something we value enormously: Trust. Trust between citizens. And trust between citizens and institutions. We tend to think of trust as something cultural. Something particularly Danish, perhaps.

But trust does not appear out of nowhere. It is built by institutions. By transparency. By independent oversight. By accountability. And by people believing that the rules apply to everyone. Denmark ranks among the least corrupt countries in the world. I am proud of that. But the point is not that corruption does not exist in Denmark. It does. The important thing is that abuse of public office is understood not simply as breaking a rule. It is breaking trust. And I know from politics how difficult trust is to build. And how quickly it can disappear. It can take years to earn the trust of people. And seconds to lose it.

I suspect there are 3,500 people in this room who understand that rather well. Because lawyers work with trust every day. Your clients need to trust you. They need to trust that their rights can be defended. You serve your clients, of course. But you also serve something fundamental to a free and democratic society: You stand up to those in power when fundamental rights are violated. And sometimes – perhaps most importantly – you have to tell a client something they do not particularly want to hear: No. You cannot do that. I became a politician rather than a practising lawyer. So perhaps I should be careful about praising the people who tell politicians what we cannot do.

But we need you. Power needs rules. And rules need people willing to defend them. We need you!

Thank you.

And welcome to Copenhagen.