

Rachel Goretsky – COP26 Reflection



To be honest, I am still not entirely sure what an observer to COP26 was supposed to do. Granted, there is a wide spectrum of “observers,” ranging from major industry leaders unveiling their new carbon neutral technology that could revolutionize freight transport to climate refugees delivering passionate testimonials calling for real action now. Then there were observers like me — seemingly just there to observe the chaos.

As an American graduate student there during the second week, especially one who was not there to present my own original climate research, the disorganized daily schedule limited what I could get into to “observe,” even with an “open” label. Want to be in the room for nitpicking of the latest negotiation of the Adaptation Fund? Depends on how many staff members each delegation brings in the room. You were

excited for the high-level plenary session on gender? You needed to fight over thirty other university representatives *yesterday* for one of the four tickets. I had a hard time being too frustrated over these hurdles because I had to agree; I am a law and diplomacy student so I know how bureaucratic and complex international negotiations are. It is not like *I* was negotiating or *I* had an important deliverable that I needed to get from that specific meeting. So, I observed the chaos itself.

My focus shifted to trying to observe how the rest of the COP viewed the unprecedentedly large United States delegation. The Biden administration has been pushing, “America’s back,” but how was that strategy landing with the rest of the world? Stumbling upon different narrow-focused and intimate events, it was fascinating to see how representatives from around the world perceived this American campaign and the future of American leadership in the climate crisis. I attended workshops and Capacity Building Hub events to really hear how people from around the world are experiencing the negotiations and next steps. Especially as an American, I took note of how others interacted with me when they found out that I had come from the States. When I asked a lead European Union negotiator if they feel America is truly “back,” he responded, “you’re back, but are you going to stay?”

This skepticism of long-term American leadership was the most pervasive feeling I got from others in Scotland. Many people told me that they were happy with the Biden administration's emphasis on multilateralism and recommitting to combatting the dire effects of climate change, but it was obvious that many countries — allies and not — came to a realization that American electoral politics probably had too much influence over global politics and institutions. Even certain American Senate staffers mused that they were unlikely to legislate concrete climate obligations. I was personally asked countless times what I was doing to get Senators Manchin and Sinema on board for more climate action, so I can only imagine how much the actual U.S. Government representatives were asked the same thing. Passing the infrastructure bill was a huge win for the administration ahead of the COP, but still many at the Conference were worried that the U.S. will not be able to actually fulfil these obligations with these two infamous senators.



The climate situation did not look to be getting any better. So why bother? This was a question I got a lot more outside of the Scottish Event Campus than even inside. In true Scottish bluntness, a taxi driver asked me, “we care. We know this is important, but the U.S. and China are not going to do anything, so what is the point? China is not even here!” It was hard to disagree. These conversations outside of the Conference itself were probably most helpful for my own professional development because this was where the complexity of “two-level” negotiations really shined.

Thinking over these frustrations and speaking with some policymakers and experts who did not need to give big speeches and grandstand to an international audience, I started to feel some level of practical optimism; this was how progress happens. Since the COP, I have spent a lot of time thinking about how these conferences — climate related or not — serve many political benefits aside from big marquee level treaties. I will value this perspective for the rest of my career: do not undervalue progress at any level. It was unrealistic to expect a Paris-level agreement and even with disappointing hurdles and postponements, there were actionable moves forward in Glasgow. As my taxi driver and I concluded, we cannot just think of multilateralism as all or nothing, especially regarding something as important as climate change. Yes, as an American, I am disappointed that we cannot do more immediately, but any step we take towards mitigation and resilience is productive; it is irresponsible to pretend

otherwise. We have to look at the progress on methane and coal, especially with South Africa. The U.S.-China announcement was a major surprise. These are not leaps and sprints towards Net Zero, but they *are* steps. The world should not wait for China and the world should not wait for the U.S. America is back, for all of its complexities, but America is never going to solve the Climate Crisis alone.

