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THE CURRENT: What happened at the UN climate change summit?

Monday, December 16, 2019

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

After two weeks of meetings and negotiations, the U.N. climate change conference, the 25th Conference of the Parties, wrapped on Friday in Madrid. Our own Bill Burke-White was there, here to tell us what happened, what he observed, what was accomplished.

One of the overall goals of this year's conference was "raising ambition," trying to get countries to think about their next steps and making bigger and better pledges. But one of the major messages we've heard from protestors as well as some of the negotiators is there just hasn't been enough urgency at these mtgs. As someone who was there, what's your takeaway on what's happening?

BURKE-WHITE: There was a great deal of ambition amongst as you said, the protestors, the observers, the indigenous populations, Greta Thunberg and the youth activists, but there was a real disconnect between that sense of urgency and ambition and what was happening in the summit meetings themselves. As you walk out of the train station, the subway station, to go into the conference center, there's all these pictures of cities sinking, signs that say, "Miami under water is not climate change, it's a climate emergency." Yet, when you look at the progress actually being made around implementation of the Paris Agreement, it's as if we have all the time in the world. A number of scientific reports have come out – a big one was released during the conference on the state of the world's oceans as a carbon sink and increasing worry about rapidly rising ocean temperatures – we've seen the 1.5 degree report that came out last year. We're in a climate emergency yet the state parties sitting in Madrid were still treating this as a problem of climate change.

PITA: What were some of the specific items on the table for this round of meetings?

BURKE-WHITE: You know, climate negotiations are really hard and really technical because a lot of this is about how much of different gases are emitted into the atmosphere, but there were probably two overall goals to be reached at COP25 this year: the first one is around what U.N. linguists call article 6 of the Paris Accord. What's that all about? It's really about figuring out a mechanism to allow carbon trading btw countries. In other words, if a country wants to build a new powerplant that's going to emit carbon, they could buy credits from another country. And the whole fight there is around double-counting. Both the country that is selling and the country that's buying the credits wants to take credit under their national commitments for that transaction. And lots and lots of fights among delegates around that, not enough progress being made.

The second big issue on the agenda this year is around loss and damage. What is loss and damage mean? It's really about how do we finance adaptation by countries that are suffering most directly from climate change. A small island state that needs to build billions of dollars' worth of sea walls so that it doesn't sink under the ocean needs to have the money to do that from somewhere. Of course, they want rich countries like the United States that have emitted lots of CO2 for a long time to finance that. Yet the rich countries don't want to pay for it. And again, lots of technical negotiations, but not much progress on it.

PITA: Before the meetings happened, we had our other colleague Nate Hultman, who was also attending the conference, we had him in and we talked a lot about what the U.S. was doing.

BURKE-WHITE: Not much.

PITA: Yeah. Actually, you said you had a funny anecdote about what exactly – the very physical representation of the U.S.'s presence.

BURKE-WHITE: So, first of all, you have to understand this is a summit that's in 10 of the largest convention halls you've ever seen all linked together in Madrid. And some of those are meeting rooms where the serious negotiations are happening. Others are spaces for country pavilions around this "ambition-raising" aspect that you talked about. And most countries built a huge pavilion there, and they had talks and country representatives at it, and a place to really galvanize activity and energy. Well, the U.S. pavilion was a blue wall that was clearly the standard that you got if you didn't spend some money to built something, with a locked door and a sign that said, "the U.S. pavilion is not staffed, please email" and then a State department email address. Just across the hall was a beautiful pavilion built by, you guessed it, China, with meeting rooms and events and activities happening and lots of talks. Now, the Chinese might have been sometimes spouting things I didn't agree with – that One Belt, One Road was going to reduce climate change somehow – but at least they were there and engaged. Just around the corner from that there was an Indian pavilion that looked like I had just walked into the streets of Delhi and, again, lots of activity there. So, the U.S. was pretty absent at the state level. The one nice piece was there was a large pavilion made up by the U.S. climate action network – a group of mayors, of governors, of local officials – talking about all that was happening at the United States at the local level, but that was just a horrible counterpoint to what wasn't happening at the national level.

PITA: But what about China and India in the official capacity – and some of the other major emitters, like maybe Brazil? What was their role this year?

BURKE-WHITE: So, China's in a very interesting place. In the climate negotiations, countries are put into sort of buckets, if you will. They kind of pre-conference with each other every morning and try to come in with unified positions. The U.S. is in something called the Umbrella Group, which is the countries that are the most economically developed. China is grouped with the G-77, and the G-77 and China are in an odd position, because China isn't always aligned with the rest of the G-77. It inhabits this place somewhere between developing country and highly developed emitter. But China was at least engaging. On issues like loss and damage, China wants to make sure that it will not be responsible for ever having to pay other countries. On issues like article 6, this question of trading of carbon credits, China feels like it's entitled to take advantage of some credits it might have earned under the prior Montreal protocol, and so was really trying to come up with the broadest structure it could to count things as part of this climate trading mechanism.

India, of course, was talking a lot about the environmental challenges that exist in India today. We've heard about the air quality in Delhi now being worse than that in Beijing, so I was pleased to see at the Indian pavilion to see talks and activity around that, but India is yet to really be a powerful voice within the negotiations themselves, something I think they will probably be growing into and continuing to do going forward.

PITA: So at next year's summit, it's supposed to be that every five years that countries make their pledges and then sort of assess where they're at and whether they've met those pledges. Of course, the expectation is that most people are not going to have met their pledges next year. What happens then – are there enforcement mechanisms, is it all self-policed?

BURKE-WHITE: The whole structure here that came out of the Paris Accord is what we call NDCs. They're non-binding governmental commitments. And the next round of commitments is next year. And what we're going to see next year is that very few countries have met their prior commitments from five years ago and that there's a growing political reluctance to make bold new commitments. Now of course, there's some exceptions to that. The new European Green New Deal that was announced this week might be a really wonderful exception to that. But I think in Glasgow, where the summit will take place next year, there's going to be a real come-to-earth moment where we have to see how little we've accomplished in the last five years and the lack of political willingness to do more.

And you asked, is there an accountability mechanism, and unfortunately, under Paris, there really isn't. There is a public shaming process, essentially, where every country's national commitments and their failure to live up to those commitments will get publicly talked about. But that doesn't mean there's a real mechanism to hold the country to account. The only mechanism goes back to some of what we were seeing outside of the conference halls, those publics who are out protesting on the streets of Madrid, or the indigenous leaders who are staging a sit-in during the conference. We've got to figure out more political accountability because there isn't real legal accountability as the Paris Agreement was drafted. I'm kind of worried that Madrid will be seen as a failure to achieve anything much. At Glasgow, more will be on the line, and less political willingness to succeed.

PITA: As a final question, can I ask you about that tension between what's happening outside the summit and what's happening inside the room?

BURKE-WHITE: I sort of described what I saw in Madrid as a kind of three-ring circus: a big spectacle without much substance, but really three distinct rings. You've got the protestors on the streets, the 500,000 people marching and Greta Thunberg speaking to them. And then you've got a series of these conference meeting halls filled with accredited observers. There were 25,000 people accredited to this conference, and that runs the gamut from youth activists to Michael Bloomberg to Mary Robinson, the former president of Ireland, they're all there not as state delegates. And they're all talking, and lots of good things being said. And then there's the third ring. You know when you're entering the third ring because a U.N. security official checks your badge and scans it, and if it's not the right color, that you're an official state party, sorry, go back out and keep protesting or talking. It's all in the same space, but there's very little connectivity, particularly around urgency as you talked about. The state parties are sitting there, slowly negotiating technical issues against this backdrop. We've got to figure out better ways to integrate the energy one sees outside with the effectiveness we're not seeing in that innermost circle of the three-ring spectacle of climate change.

PITA: Well, we'll see what happens next year in Glasgow, and Bill, maybe we'll have you back on.

BURKE-WHITE: I look forward to it. Thank you very much.