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‘This is not about Russia, this is about multilateralism’

Christian Wenaweser, Liechtenstein’s UN Ambassador, on how his country’s veto initiative could help restore the United Nations’ effectiveness

Liechtenstein has just initiated a resolution at the United Nations that mandates a meeting of the General Assembly whenever a veto is cast in the Security Council. What’s behind this initiative?

The veto initiative is a simple idea, but we think it politically very meaningful. It simply says that every time a veto is cast in the Security Council, there is automatically a meeting convened by the General Assembly to discuss the proposed veto in the Security Council. So it’s an automatic mandate. It’s not subject to any further intervention or decision.

It’s a mandate that is given to whoever is the president of the General Assembly at that time to be convened within the said timeframe. It’s open-ended with regards to the outcome. It’s completely non-prescriptive. The only thing that is mandatory is the meeting and the discussions themselves.

Could you elaborate on the motivation for this initiative? Why is this happening now?

We’re doing it because we believe in strong multilateralism. We have followed with growing concern the inability of the Security Council to take effective action against threats to international peace and security due to the very deep political divisions among the permanent members in the Council.

We are concerned about the negative impact that this has on the effectiveness of the United Nations. So if you look at our statements in the last five years or so, we have consistently advocated for a strong role of the General Assembly in matters of international peace and security as mandated by the Charter of the United Nations. This initiative is a meaningful step in that direction.

The reason why we're doing it now is twofold. First of all, we were close to launching this initiative in March of 2020 when we were hit by the lockdown. This is not the type of thing that we can do online. So we decided that we need support from close sponsors to push this. The lockdown is over while the pandemic is not, so that's one of the reasons why we're doing it now.

The other reason is that we sensed that the wider membership of the United Nations is now particularly attuned to this initiative. Now people have a strong sense that the United Nations needs to innovate itself and find different ways of doing business.

Is there a reason why you do not mention the 'R' word in this context?

Yes and no. If you look at the numbers, it's clear who has vetoed the biggest number of resolutions in recent years. That is the Russian Federation – mostly with regards to Syria. But our initiative is not aimed at Russia or directed against Russia. It's simply about the veto and the institutional balance. It's about the role that we believe the General Assembly should play in this organisation.

What are the chances for this resolution being adopted? There was some speculation that it is going to be discussed this week and there's going to be a vote in the coming days.

The vote is not going to be this week. This week we will have a formal presentation with the membership. We will then look to get a date in the General Assembly soon thereafter. We are getting a strong positive response to this. So we are very confident that our text will be adopted.

Are you concerned that the initiative – if adopted – could be used as a political tool to put other countries who have veto powers on the spot? Or that countries that are put on the spot in the General Assembly because of a veto then go on to use the debate in the Assembly to generate even more attention for their view than they would have gotten only on the Council?

This is not about putting anyone on the spot. Our resolution does provide that the delegations that vetoed in the Security Council are offered the first slot in the speakers list because we would like to hear from them why they vetoed, and why they think it's in the interest of the organisation, why they think it's compatible with the principles of the Charter. That's an invitation extended to them and, as is the case with any invitation, you can accept it or not.

It's not about putting anyone on the spot, but about accountability.

It's about being given a voice in what we think are issues over which we have ownership. The Charter of the United Nations says clearly that the Security Council does its work on behalf of the membership.

Are you surprised that your initiative is receiving support from Washington at this point?

Well, the obvious thing to say is you should ask the US ambassador. But I am happy to share my thoughts. The US have stated their reasons very clearly. We think what they are saying is very important as it is coming from a permanent member of the Security Council that has had a mixed history with the United Nations over the years.

This US administration has supported a big step for the Security Council to invoke the Uniting for Peace procedure in connection with the Russian aggression against Ukraine. I think they have just come to realise that for UN to remain relevant, the General Assembly has to move into the centre. For us, that's an important and hopeful sign. For us, this is a vote on multilateralism. This is not just to vote on a procedural mechanism that gives the General Assembly more power.

Also, if we understand you correctly, it's not a vote on Russia.

Not for us. Some observers obviously think we are doing this because of what's going on in Ukraine. That's not true. But of course, what is going on in Ukraine and the lack of response by the Security Council makes it abundantly clear that what we are doing is the right thing to do. But in fact we've been working on this for the last two-and-a-half years.

Unfortunately, sometimes UN initiatives come in with some momentum but then unfortunately nothing is really coming out of it once they are adopted. The Mexican-French initiative to voluntarily restrain the use of the veto in the Council after the blockage of the Council in 2013, for instance, comes to mind. Are you concerned that this could happen once again?

I am not sure I would agree with that assessment. After all, the French-Mexican initiative was never adopted. It was just something that was put on the table.

This will be a General Assembly resolution. This is going to be an intergovernmental mandate that the General Assembly creates for itself. It is going to be there in perpetuity, and it will be implemented automatically. And it is going to make a difference.

This interview was conducted by Michael Bröning and Volker Lehmann.



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