

UN veto initiative 'hits a nerve': Liechtenstein diplomat



By Maria Luisa
Gambale
Journalist

INTERVIEW

Two years ago, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Veto Initiative through an effort led by Ambassador Christian Wenaweser of Liechtenstein. The initiative establishes that if any of the permanent members of the Security Council — Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States — casts a veto in a vote, the president of the General Assembly must convene a formal meeting of the body within 10 business days, incurring a debate on the disputed issue. For now, the relevant countries have stepped up to the Assembly rostrum to do as required.

However, the public may not perceive any changes in Security Council actions, as vetoes continue to be wielded, especially on resolutions related to the war in Gaza. But Wenaweser is optimistic about the initiative's effect on Council proceedings and aims to take it further.

Liechtenstein tried to push through the initiative, officially the "standing mandate for a General Assembly debate when a veto is cast in the Security Council," in 2020, but the pandemic created delays. The initiative was finally adopted on April 26, 2022. Since then, there have been 13 votes resulting in a veto, with Russia responsible for six and another three with China. The US has blocked the remaining four, three of them related to the war in Gaza and the other to the question of Palestinian full membership in the UN.



US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield (front) casts a veto vote against a Brazil-sponsored draft demanding an immediate humanitarian cease-fire in the Israeli war on Gaza, during a UN Security Council meeting on February 20, 2024.

ANGELA WEISS/AFP



Christian Wenaweser, Liechtenstein's ambassador to the United Nations, addresses the 93-member General Assembly before it adopts a Security Council reform resolution on April 26, 2022.

AP/REUTERS

PASSBLUE: How did Liechtenstein become the leader on the veto initiative?

WENAWESER: It certainly has a lot to do with my trajectory here at the UN. I started taking a very active interest in Security Council reform a long time ago, 2005, when I was the adviser to the then-president on the issue. I concluded that while everybody was talking about enlargement, it was much more important to talk about working methods, issues, and the veto. And Liechtenstein has a bit of a history of doing things that other people think are great, but they wouldn't do themselves. We did the Council resolution on Myanmar, in 2022, which expressed "deep concern" over the state of emergency imposed by the military in the country, and the plenary that nobody else wanted to touch. That was bold by UN standards. We established the Syria Accountability Mechanism [which provides for the investigation and prosecution of people responsible for atrocity crimes committed in Syria since March 2011], which now everybody thinks is a great idea, but nobody except us would have done it.

We don't mind doing them ourselves. And of course, it's an advantage that nobody thinks we're pursuing grand policy national interests. We are a credible player, and people believe that we do it in the interests of the institution.

Having had the veto initiative idea for so long and now seeing it in action, how do you think it's working out in practice?

Overall, it's been more successful than I had hoped and thought. It's now firmly established. For example, at a meeting this morning [September 6], the new president of the General Assembly talked about it. So, it's a speaking point for everybody. It resonates very, very strongly and positively. I didn't necessarily expect that. So, it just confirms that the veto just hits a nerve. And when people talk about Security Council en-

largement, the problem is the veto. The problem is not "Does Brazil get a seat" or "Does India get a seat." The problem is the veto. That's why we have not been able to enlarge the Security Council. I think there's huge, further potential in it because what is happening now is extremely positive, but it's also not where it ends. So, we want to get more out of it. What we want for the General Assembly is to not only respond but to adopt its own decisions.

Many observers may say there are still atrocities happening unchecked, with no accountability. Where exactly do you see the positive?

There is accountability now because you go to the General Assembly, and people can say what they want to say. And people are also able to propose something in response to a veto if they so wish. I think that is a game-changer. Of course, it hasn't stopped the vetoes so far. If you look at the states that have vetoed since the adoption of the veto initiative, the Russians don't particularly care. They're fine vetoing and going to the General Assembly and playing the game, and they're happy to give their speech.

The Chinese, not so much. They feel very uncomfortable. And I think the initiative has increased their level of discomfort with the veto. So, I think the bar for China to veto something is higher now.

The US is a special case because they co-sponsored the veto initiative. And you would have to ask them how they feel about it because they have vetoed several times now. But our selling point to the US at the time was saying, "Look, your vetoes are all Middle East vetoes. They go to the General Assembly anyway on the emergency special session [ESS]. So, the veto initiative takes all the Russian vetoes to the General Assembly. So, it levels the playing field for you." Which is still true.

Why does it stymie China to have to defend its Council vetoes in the Gen-

eral Assembly? Why does it make them uncomfortable?

Because they know that the veto is unpopular and want to have strong partnerships with the membership. Russia certainly cares less at this time.

What are some highlights on how the process is working or the actual value coming out from the General Assembly (GA) debates? What are some specific cases?

The first veto since the mandate was established was on nuclear issues with DPRK [North Korea]. And the first question is always, "Is the state going to show up in the General Assembly?" Because you can, as a P5 country, say, "I have no obligation to go to the GA and to explain my veto. I said what I had to say at the time of adoption or no adoption at the time of action in the Security Council. The GA is not the body to discuss the veto because the veto is cast in the Council." So, that is an accountability exercise because our argument has always been institutionally that the Security Council does its work on behalf of all of us. That's what the UN Charter says. If I ask you to do something for me and you're not doing it, then I can say, "We had an agreement that you do this for me. By showing up, you're accepting that premise." That's very big. Because the P5, to varying degrees, have all in the past said, "We are not accountable. We have the veto in the UN Charter. If we cast it, we cast it. If we don't, we don't. The rest is none of your business." So, that is extremely positive. What's also extremely positive is just the strong interest. We have 70 to 80 states showing up, participating in the GA debates. That shows how much people care.

The third thing is that people are thinking differently about the role of the General Assembly now. And we want to take this further because what we want is a collective mindset, where people say, "If the Council doesn't do it, then we will do it." That's the philosophy of the veto initiative.

So, this is one step in a long process. As to other efforts, let's talk first about the Pact for the Future and its work on creating momentum at least for Security Council reform and general governance reform. How much faith are you putting in that process for advancing work on the veto problem?

Not much. Not to say I don't care what the Pact of the Future says about this, but it's also not that important. The veto initiative is there, and for me, that's enough. For us, it was also important to include the reference to Article 27(3) [in the UN Charter], which is the provision that says if you are a party to dispute, you have to abstain in a vote because for us, that is a complementary initiative. That's much more important because that gives us a foothold to base our work on Article 27(3). The veto initiative is established. It has its own life. It will continue unless the Summit of the Future says the veto initiative is no longer valid.

What's an ideal future for you with the veto overall?

You have three schools of thought: The P5 that say, "The veto is a fact of life, get lost." Not all of them say that. The French and the Brits don't say that. But that's what the Russians think. And it's what the Chinese think. The second is that the veto is bad, it should be abolished. And that is formally the view of a majority of the member states, a vast majority. But nobody believes it's feasible, so nobody's proposing it. But they all go in the room and say that the veto is bad, and there should be no more vetoes. And then some people add, "The veto should be gone. But while it's not, I want it too. So, if you abolish it, that's fine. But if you don't, give it to me."

We are none of those. What we are saying is: Look, the veto is part of the Charter. We have all accepted it when we joined the UN, without enthusiasm in many cases. But it's part of the treaty. We are not able to abolish the veto unless the P5 say they

“Between Russia, the US, and China, you're just not going to have a broad basis for agreement on most issues. That means we will have for the foreseeable future a Security Council that can't do its work because someone is going to veto anything meaningful. So, our choice is to either say, "We have a UN that does not do work on peace and security," or we do the work differently. For us, it's the latter.