

UN chief warns of new Cold War ahead of UN summit

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Guterres said the world's two major economic powers should be cooperating on climate and negotiating more robustly on trade and technology [File: Maxim Shemetov/AFP]

United Nations, September 20 (RHC)-- United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has warned of a potential new Cold War between China and the United States, and implored the two major powers to repair their “completely dysfunctional” relationship.

“We need to avoid at all cost a Cold War that would be different from the past one, and probably more dangerous and more difficult to manage,” Guterres said ahead of the annual UN General Assembly

gathering of world leaders – a convening blemished by COVID, climate concerns and contentiousness across the planet.

Guterres said the world's two major economic powers should be cooperating on climate and negotiating more robustly on trade and technology even given persisting political fissures about human rights, economics, online security and sovereignty in the South China Sea.

“Unfortunately, today we only have confrontation,” Guterres said in an interview with the Associated Press. “We need to re-establish a functional relationship between the two powers,” he said, adding that it is “essential to address the problems of vaccination, the problems of climate change and many other global challenges that cannot be solved without constructive relations within the international community and mainly among the superpowers.”

Two years ago, Guterres warned global leaders of the risk of the world splitting into two camps, with the US and China creating rival internets, currency, trade, financial rules “and their own zero-sum geopolitical and military strategies.”

He reiterated that warning in the AP interview, adding that two rival geopolitical and military strategies would pose “dangers” and divide the world. Thus, he said, the foundering relationship must be repaired – and soon.

The so-called Cold War between the Soviet Union and its East-bloc allies and the U.S. and its Western allies began immediately after World War II and ended with the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was a clash of two nuclear-armed superpowers with rival ideologies – communism and authoritarianism on one side, capitalism and democracy on the other.

The UN chief said a new cold war could be more perilous because the Soviet-US antipathy created clear rules, and both sides were conscious of the risk of nuclear destruction. That resulted in back channels and forums “to guarantee that things would not get out of control,” he said.

“Now, today, everything is more fluid, and even the experience that existed in the past to manage crisis is no longer there,” Guterres said.

He said the U.S.-Britain deal to give Australia nuclear-powered submarines so it could operate undetected in Asia “is just one small piece of a more complex puzzle ... this completely dysfunctional relationship between China and the United States.”

The secretly negotiated deal angered China and France, which had signed a contract with Australia worth at least \$66bn for a dozen French conventional diesel-electric submarines.

In the wide-ranging AP interview, the secretary-general also addressed three major issues that world leaders will be confronting this week: the worsening climate crisis, the still-raging pandemic, and Afghanistan's uncertain future under its new Taliban rulers.

The Taliban took power on August 15 without a fight from the government's U.S.-trained army as American forces were in the final stage of withdrawing from the country after 20 years of war.

What role will the UN have in the new Afghanistan? Guterres called it “a fantasy” to believe that UN involvement “will be able all of a sudden to produce an inclusive government, to guarantee that all human rights are respected, to guarantee that no terrorists will ever exist in Afghanistan, that drug trafficking will stop.”

After all, he said, the U.S. and many other countries had thousands of soldiers in Afghanistan and spent trillions of dollars yet were not able to solve the country's problems – rather, some say, made them worse.

Though the UN has “limited capacity and limited leverage”, he said, it is playing a key role in leading efforts to provide humanitarian aid to Afghans. The UN is also drawing the Taliban’s attention to the importance of an inclusive government that respects human rights, especially for women and girls, he said.

“There is clearly a fight for power within different groups in the Taliban leadership. The situation is not yet clarified,” he said, calling it one more reason why the international community should engage with the Taliban.

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