



Ending War: A Plan Tested Against the World of September 2026

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This plan is an initial draft prepared with AI models. It is open for review by subject-matter experts and will be revised as they join the work and as world and national events change.

Introduction

No plan will eliminate war entirely, but a realistic one can make war rare, short, and far less deadly. That is the argument of this essay. It begins with a plan built on one of the most useful findings in political science, then tests that plan against the state of the world in September 2026, and finally considers how the newest development in military technology, weapons deployed in space, changes the picture.

The starting insight is that war is almost always a costly failure to bargain. Fighting destroys the very things both sides want: lives, money, territory, infrastructure, and legitimacy. In principle, then, there is nearly always some negotiated settlement that both sides would prefer to the war itself. Wars happen when something prevents that deal from being reached or kept.

Those obstacles are well studied. Leaders may not bear the costs of the wars they start. Each side may overestimate its own chances. One side may be unable to trust that the other will honor a deal once the balance of power shifts. Some prizes may seem indivisible or too valuable to share. And some wars are driven by grievance, humiliation, ideology, or revenge rather than material calculation. A plan to end war works by attacking each of these obstacles directly.

The world of late 2026 is a hard test for such a plan. A major land war continues in Ukraine. A fragile ceasefire in Gaza has stalled. The United States and Israel have been at war with Iran since February. Sudan's civil war is the world's largest humanitarian crisis. The last US-Russia nuclear arms treaty has expired, UN peacekeeping is running out of money, and the United States has just confirmed that it has weapons in orbit. Nearly every pillar of the plan is under visible strain. A few recent events, however, show what works.

Part I: A plan to end war

The plan has seven pillars. Each targets one of the reasons that bargaining fails, and together they aim to make fighting almost never the best option for the people who decide whether to fight.

1. Make the people who start wars bear their costs

Leaders who face few checks can start wars whose costs fall on everyone else. Soldiers die, civilians suffer, and economies collapse, while the decision-makers themselves are often insulated. The first pillar therefore strengthens checks on executive power: legislatures that control war powers, independent courts, and a free press that can expose the true costs of conflict.

The same logic applies internationally. Sanctions and prosecutions should target decision-makers and their assets rather than whole populations, who have little say in the matter. International criminal accountability should be built out and, critically, enforced consistently. Selective enforcement undermines the norm, because it teaches leaders that accountability depends on who their friends are.

2. Reduce uncertainty

Many wars begin because each side believes it will win. Both cannot be right, and the war itself becomes the costly process by which the loser discovers its mistake. Reducing uncertainty before fighting starts is therefore one of the most powerful tools of prevention.

This pillar calls for greater military transparency through satellite monitoring, inspections, and data-sharing agreements. It calls for crisis hotlines and routine military-to-military contacts, especially between rivals, so that intentions can be clarified quickly in a crisis. And it calls for funding independent, open-source verification, so that bluffs and false alarms are exposed before they drive decisions.

3. Solve commitment problems

Often the obstacle to peace is not disagreement over terms but distrust about the future. One side cannot believe the other will keep a deal once the balance of power shifts in its favor. A party that disarms today may be defenseless tomorrow.

Third-party guarantors and peacekeepers are the classic solution, and UN peacekeeping has a solid track record of reducing the chance that civil wars restart. Power-sharing arrangements help by ensuring that losing an election is not existential for any group. Disarmament and demobilization should be staged gradually, with verification at each step, so that no side has to take a leap of faith. And credible security guarantees can reassure states that might otherwise gamble on a preventive war.

4. Shrink the prizes worth fighting over

War is more likely when there is something valuable and capturable to fight over. The post-1945 norm against conquering territory has been one of history's most successful peace tools, and it deserves reinforcement. Transparency in revenue from oil, minerals, and other natural resources reduces the payoff to seizing them. Over the long run, economies built on trade, knowledge, and services create wealth that simply cannot be captured by force.

5. Address grievances, identity, and misperception

Not every war is a cold calculation. Some are driven by humiliation, revenge, or ideology. Inclusive political institutions give aggrieved groups a real voice short of violence. Programs that bring rival groups into cooperative contact can erode hostility. Dehumanizing propaganda should be countered early, because it is one of the most reliable warning signs of mass violence. After conflict, truth and reconciliation processes can help break cycles of revenge.

6. Invest heavily in prevention

Prevention is consistently found to be far cheaper than war and reconstruction, yet it receives a small fraction of the resources. This pillar calls for early-warning systems and standing mediation teams that can deploy before violence starts. In fragile states, most of today's wars are civil wars, and their main risk factors are well known: a lack of jobs for young men, weak state capacity, and unfair policing. Addressing those directly is prevention.

7. Control the tools

The final pillar addresses weapons themselves. It calls for maintaining and expanding nuclear arms control, including risk-reduction steps such as keeping human decision-makers in control of launches and setting rules for artificial intelligence in command systems. It calls for restricting flows of small arms, which do most of the killing in civil wars. And it calls for negotiating early norms for autonomous weapons and for cyberattacks on civilian infrastructure, before those technologies mature.

Sequencing

The pillars operate on different timescales. In the near term, roughly the next five years, the priorities are crisis hotlines, mediation capacity, targeted sanctions, resource transparency, and stronger peacekeeping mandates. Over the medium term, five to twenty years, the aim is durable arms control regimes, power-sharing institutions in fragile states, and stronger international courts. In the long term, over a generation or more, the goal is

accountable governments almost everywhere, deep economic interdependence, and a norm against conquest as strong as the norm against slavery.

The hard problems

An honest plan must acknowledge its limits. The first is enforcement without a world government: someone has to impose costs on violators, and great powers can veto that. The second is the deterrence paradox: peace often depends on credible military strength, so demilitarizing too quickly can invite aggression. The third is the determined aggressor, a leader who values conquest or ideology more than any deal on offer; for such leaders, defense and deterrence remain necessary. The fourth is the tension between justice and peace, since the promise of prosecution can make a leader less willing to step down.

None of these problems is a reason to abandon the plan. They are reasons to pursue it with realism. And there is real progress to build on: wars between major powers have been unusually rare since 1945.

Part II: The plan against the world of September 2026

Taken together, the events of 2026 are a stress test of nearly every idea in the plan. This section examines the major conflicts and institutions one pillar at a time.

Commitment problems at the core of the major negotiations

Ukraine. The war in Ukraine is now more than four years old. US-led peace talks resumed in early September 2026 after a six-month pause, with envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner visiting Moscow and then Kyiv. Russia and Ukraine each pledged not to strike the other's capital for three days during the talks, and another round is expected in October, although no date has been set ([House of Commons Library](#); [Al Jazeera](#)).

Ukraine's central concern throughout has been whether Russia would actually keep any deal it signs. In late 2025, President Zelensky said discussions with US negotiators focused on ensuring Russia would honor a future agreement. That is precisely the gap that third-party security guarantees, the plan's third pillar, are designed to fill.

Uncertainty is the other obstacle. The Kremlin has said it is confident it can seize the rest of eastern Ukraine, and Russian analysts argue that the war is tilting in Russia's favor and that the current US-backed terms are the best Kyiv can hope for ([Christian Science Monitor](#)). Russian officials gave no sign after the September meetings that Moscow was prepared to drop its demand for territorial concessions. As long as one side believes time is on its side, the bargaining model predicts stalemate at the table.

Gaza. In Gaza the problem is sequencing. The ceasefire plan announced in September 2025 was meant to proceed in three phases, with gradual Israeli withdrawal and

reconstruction in the second. As of May 2026, however, negotiations had stalled over repeated Israeli attacks and disagreements about Hamas disarmament ([Wikipedia: Gaza peace plan](#)). The Board of Peace and the Palestinian technocratic committee were named in January 2026, but neither was operating on the ground months later ([J Street](#)).

An analysis by the European Council on Foreign Relations argues that sustaining the ceasefire requires dropping the insistence on full disarmament before governance, reconstruction, or politics, and suggests a Northern Ireland-style approach to decommissioning weapons ([ECFR](#)). That is the plan's principle of staged, verified disarmament applied to a live case. The cost of stalemate is enormous: more than 75,000 people had been reported killed in the Gaza war as of late August 2026 ([Wikipedia: Timeline of the Gaza war](#)).

Ambiguous deals break down: the Iran war

The war with Iran shows why agreements need precise terms and verification. The United States and Israel have been at war with Iran since February 28, 2026 ([Wikipedia: 2026 Iran war](#)). A Pakistan-mediated ceasefire in April immediately ran into a dispute over its scope. The parties disagreed about whether Lebanon was included, and within hours of the announcement Israeli strikes across Lebanon killed hundreds of people ([Britannica](#)).

A later agreement also failed. A memorandum to end the war was signed on June 17 and lifted a dual blockade, but it collapsed on July 8 after Iran attacked commercial vessels in the Strait of Hormuz. Diplomacy nonetheless continues. This month, at the United Nations, Iran presented the United States with a road map providing for a regionwide ceasefire of up to 60 days, a phased reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, and an end to the American blockade ([GlobalSecurity](#)). A phased, reciprocal structure of that kind is the right shape for a deal. Whether it holds will depend on whether each side can trust the other's steps.

Thin accountability where it is most needed: Sudan

Sudan is the clearest failure of the plan's first pillar. The war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces is now in its fourth year, with more than six million people displaced inside the country and another 4.5 million forced across its borders ([UN News via GlobalSecurity](#)). More than 100,000 people have been killed ([Washington Institute](#)).

The accountability tools are narrow. The International Criminal Court's mandate is limited to Darfur, leaving no independent judicial mechanism to prosecute grave crimes committed elsewhere in Sudan ([Human Rights Watch](#)). The UN Security Council was due this month to vote on renewing the Sudan sanctions regime and arms embargo, and reports of Colombian mercenaries fighting alongside the RSF in Darfur show how outside sponsors keep the war supplied ([Security Council Report](#)).

The war is also spreading geographically. Both sides increasingly use long-range drones, extending attacks far beyond traditional front lines. That makes the plan's seventh pillar, controlling the tools of war, urgent in civil wars as well as between great powers.

The arms control architecture has lapsed

When New START expired on February 5, 2026, the United States and Russia were left without any legally binding limits on their nuclear forces for the first time in decades. They also lost the treaty's monitoring and transparency measures ([Atlantic Council](#)). That loss feeds directly into the uncertainty problem at the heart of the plan's second pillar.

Russia pledged to observe the treaty's limits unilaterally for one more year, until February 2027, but the United States has not reciprocated or announced unilateral measures of its own ([ORF Middle East](#)). Meanwhile, China's rapid nuclear build-up has become the newest driver of a renewed arms race ([SIPRI](#)). Any serious successor agreement now has to involve three powers rather than two, which is far harder to negotiate.

Prevention capacity is shrinking as demand rises

The plan leans heavily on peacekeeping and mediation, and both are being defunded. The UN entered 2026 with no cash reserve. Against a peacekeeping budget of about \$5.3 billion, a shortfall of roughly \$2.1 billion accumulated within the first three weeks of the fiscal year, so missions are shrinking by default rather than by any political decision ([Center on International Cooperation](#)).

In 2025 the United States cancelled roughly \$800 million in previously appropriated peacekeeping funds, and the White House proposed eliminating all US peacekeeping funding for 2026, citing mission failures in Mali, Lebanon, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo ([Lowy Institute](#)). Supporters of the cuts point to those failures. Critics note that peacekeeping is among the better-evidenced tools for preventing civil wars from restarting. Either way, the capacity is shrinking at the moment it is most needed.

Deterrence and the gray zone: Taiwan

Taiwan illustrates the tension between deterrence and deal-making. China continues a campaign of gray-zone pressure, including incursions into Taiwan's air defense zone and expanding Coast Guard operations ([Council on Foreign Relations](#)). There are also signs of restraint. Chinese military activity around Taiwan fell sharply in August, and purges of senior commanders appear to have degraded the People's Liberation Army's readiness for complex amphibious operations ([East Asia Forum](#)).

There is a live debate about bargaining over deterrence itself. One analysis describes an unannounced \$14 billion arms package for Taiwan becoming a bargaining chip in US-China relations ahead of a leaders' summit ([The Diplomat](#)). Whether trading away

deterrence buys stability or invites risk is exactly the deterrence paradox identified in Part I.

A genuine bright spot: mediation is diversifying

One encouraging trend is that middle powers are carrying more of the diplomatic load. Pakistan mediated the US-Iran ceasefire and hosted the Islamabad talks. Qatar and Egypt drafted bridging proposals on Gaza. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States form the Quad that is attempting to resolve the war in Sudan. The plan called for standing mediation capacity. What is emerging instead is ad hoc and personality-driven, but it exists, and it has produced ceasefires, even if they have not yet held.

Part III: Space-based weapons

The newest pressure on the plan comes from orbit. In September 2026 the United States confirmed for the first time that it has weapons in space, while its Golden Dome missile-defense program moves toward testing interceptors in orbit. These developments touch nearly every pillar of the plan.

What was announced

On September 14, 2026, Air Force Secretary Troy Meink told the Air & Space Forces Association's annual conference that the Space Force has deployed on-orbit space control weapons capable of defending US forces against hostile action. It was the first time a Pentagon official had confirmed that the United States has space-based weapons ([DefenseScoop](#)). Meink gave no details about what kind of weapons they are or how many are in orbit. Afterward he said the disclosure was deliberate and that the phrasing had been carefully thought out ([MiGFlug](#)). He also said he would not rule out kinetic weapons, which physically destroy their targets, and that the systems could serve offensive or defensive purposes ([Slate](#)).

The second development is Golden Dome, the administration's national missile-defense program. In April the Space Force named twelve companies competing to build interceptors in low Earth orbit that could destroy missiles in their boost, midcourse, and glide phases, with contracts worth up to \$3.2 billion combined ([Defense One](#); [DefenseScoop](#)). At the same September conference, Meink said the space-based interceptors had reached flight-ready hardware ([Breaking Defense](#)). Initial testing is planned before the end of 2026, with orbital flight demonstrations in 2027 ([Army Recognition](#)).

Cost estimates vary enormously. When the program was announced it was estimated at \$175 billion. A newer analysis puts the cost at \$1.2 trillion over 20 years ([GovConWire](#)).

The program's own leader has told Congress that boost-phase interceptors may prove too expensive to make the final architecture.

The reactions

Russia and China reacted sharply to Meink's disclosure. China's foreign ministry accused the United States of preparing for war in outer space and starting an orbital arms race, and the Kremlin called for the complete demilitarization of space ([Hoodline](#)). The two countries had earlier condemned Golden Dome in a joint statement as deeply destabilizing.

The US position is that it is responding rather than escalating. Defenders of the program point to Chinese and Russian jammers, directed-energy weapons, cyber capabilities, ground-launched anti-satellite missiles, and satellites able to maneuver close to other satellites ([The Hill](#)). The United States has also warned Russia against deploying a nuclear-capable anti-satellite weapon that could loiter in orbit and then emit a burst disabling every satellite around it ([CBS News](#)).

How space weapons affect the plan

They worsen the uncertainty problem. Satellites are how nations verify each other's behavior. Since New START expired, satellite monitoring is essentially the only tool left for watching US and Russian nuclear forces. Weapons that can blind or destroy those satellites threaten the transparency that keeps miscalculation in check. Meink's disclosure cuts both ways. Revealing a capability can reduce misperception, which is the logic of deterrence. But revealing it while withholding every specific can push rivals toward worst-case planning.

They accelerate the nuclear arms race. Chinese and Russian analysts argue that an effective Golden Dome could blunt their ability to strike the US homeland and so undermine their nuclear deterrents. A CSIS assessment expects them to respond by doubling down on areas of perceived advantage, including anti-satellite weapons and novel delivery systems ([CSIS](#)). This compounds the post-New START problem. Offensive and defensive weapons are linked, so any future three-way nuclear agreement will likely have to address missile defense as well. Russia and China have said explicitly that they see the two as inseparable.

They create first-strike incentives in a crisis. This is a new form of the commitment problem. Many analysts expect that any US war with Russia or China would open with attacks on satellites. If each side fears losing its eyes and communications in the first minutes of a conflict, each has a reason to strike first. That is a dangerous dynamic to add to the Taiwan Strait, where gray-zone pressure is already constant.

They expose a gap in the rules. The 1967 Outer Space Treaty bans nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction in orbit but does not restrict conventional weapons. Diplomacy on space arms control is deadlocked in both directions. Russia, backed by China, tried at the UN to extend the ban to all weapons, but the United States and Britain blocked it, arguing that a weapon is too hard to define in space ([Irish Times](#)). In April 2024, Russia vetoed a US-Japanese resolution that would have reaffirmed the existing ban on nuclear weapons in space ([SBS News](#)). Each side accuses the other of bad faith. Both have a point, and the definitional problem is real.

They raise questions of priorities. Golden Dome is costed at hundreds of billions to more than a trillion dollars, while the UN peacekeeping system faces a shortfall of roughly \$2 billion. These are different budgets serving different goals, and supporters argue that homeland defense is a government's core obligation. Still, the contrast bears directly on the plan's argument that prevention is cheap and chronically underfunded.

Where the plan would push

Consistent with the framework in Part I, the most promising steps would be narrow, verifiable, and in every side's interest:

- **Ban destructive anti-satellite tests** that create orbital debris. Debris threatens everyone's satellites, including the attacker's.
- **Reaffirm the nuclear ban in space** and make it enforceable, given concern about Russian nuclear anti-satellite weapons.
- **Mutually protect early-warning and nuclear command satellites.** Attacking these is the fastest path to accidental nuclear escalation.
- **Create space hotlines and proximity rules**, such as advance notice before one satellite maneuvers close to another.
- **Fold missile defense and space weapons into any post-New START talks**, since neither issue can realistically be settled on its own.

The honest caveat is that each side sees its own programs as defensive and the other's as offensive. That problem is as old as arms control itself. It has been overcome before only when both sides feared the unconstrained alternative more than the constraints.

Conclusion

Measured against the plan, the world of September 2026 shows three pillars under the most strain. Transparency has weakened because nuclear arms control has lapsed and the satellites that provide verification are now potential targets. Third-party guarantees have weakened because peacekeeping is being defunded. Accountability remains selective, most visibly in Sudan.

The most urgent obstacle to ending specific wars right now is the commitment problem. The negotiations over Ukraine and Gaza both turn on who guarantees what, and in what order. The collapse of successive Iran ceasefires shows what happens when terms are ambiguous and steps cannot be verified. Space weapons add a new version of the same problem by giving each side an incentive to strike first in a crisis.

If one were to choose near-term moves consistent with the plan, they would be these:

- Reciprocal interim nuclear limits with data exchanges, as a bridge to a three-way agreement that also addresses missile defense.
- Phased, verifiable sequencing in Gaza and around the Strait of Hormuz.
- Stable, predictable funding for UN peacekeeping.
- Broader accountability for crimes in Sudan and real enforcement of the arms embargo.
- Narrow, verifiable rules for space: no debris-creating anti-satellite tests, a reaffirmed nuclear ban, and mutual protection of early-warning satellites.

Reasonable people disagree sharply about how much of this is achievable, and about the right balance between military pressure and concession. Those disagreements are part of the problem the plan must work through, not a reason to abandon it.

The underlying goal does not change. Ending war means building a world in which fighting is almost never the best option for the people who decide whether to fight. Humanity has already made real progress toward that goal since 1945. The task now is to protect that progress under new strain and extend it to the conflicts where it has not yet taken hold.

Events are moving quickly; this essay reflects reporting available as of September 27, 2026.

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