The study of international conflict suffers from an oversupply of theories and a shortage of comprehensive comparative empirical tests. Theories in international relations are typically tested a few at a time, resulting in serious misspecification in analysis, a lack of comparable data sets and findings, and a lack of cumulation in our understanding of international relations. With a plethora of theories, conjectures, and hypotheses of international conflict in hand, we believe that it is appropriate and necessary to conduct a thorough empirical appraisal of those arguments. It is also important and necessary to devote significant attention to several important theories of international relations that have been especially poorly tested, in particular the so-called expected utility theory of war. Empirical tests of variants of expected utility theory have been executed in very limited settings, despite expansive claims about the theory’s power and scope. Given the limited tests of most theories in international relations, claims about the power of this and other theories are often overstated.

Different theories, hypotheses, and conjectures about the sources of international conflict are typically seen as competing explanations for observed behavior. Our advocacy of comparative testing emerges from a different view. We conceive of international political actions as emerging from a variety of causes. Most theories focus on one or a limited set of these causes, ignoring the others. Theories focusing on multiple sources of behavior need not be contradictory; rather, they may be either complementary or competing. Following this logic, many theories or hypotheses may simultaneously be correct. We argue that traditional conceptions of and debates over competing approaches to international relations theory that suggest that one theory is necessarily right and another necessarily wrong are dated and not helpful in understanding actual behavior. Instead, while some theories are independent, others are overlapping. Multiple theories purporting
to explain a single phenomenon (such as war) may be valid. If this perspective is correct, then cumulative scientific progress in international relations will be made more rapidly if we shift to analyses that focus both on what set of theories is valid and on the relative explanatory power of those theories. While multiple theories may each explain part of reality, not all theories are created equal, and some theories have more empirical relevance than others. But we cannot tell this without engaging in broad comparative empirical testing.

Unfortunately, typical research designs complicate attempts to evaluate claims about the validity of a broad set of theories of international conflict or the relative power of competing or complementary theories. We develop an appropriate research design for such analysis. We use a methodology based on block maximum-likelihood tests and relative risk analysis that allows us to assess what theories contribute additional explanatory power to our understanding of international conflict, even after taking into account the effects associated with the empirical measures associated with a large number of other theories. We also develop software to allow the creation of the type of data necessary for the analysis we advocate, to allow precise replication, and to encourage further comparative theory testing. This same software allows us to conduct a more thorough empirical test of the expected utility theory of war than has been executed before.

In particular, we evaluate the relative strength of sixteen different explanations for international conflict drawn from the system, dyadic, and monadic levels of analysis, ranging from hegemonic stability theory to expected utility theory to the democratic peace proposition. We include key variables from these popular theories of conflict in a multinomial logit analyses of dispute and war behavior. We find that many theories suggest factors that contribute in important ways to both the initiation and the escalation of militarized disputes. However, while many theories do contribute to the overall prediction of international conflict, most theories are quite weak individually and are generally comparable in terms of predictive effect. We demonstrate that in terms of empirical explanatory power there is no existing single dominant theory of international conflict in the international relations literature. Rather, we must take into account variables from several different theories to explain international conflict more accurately. This is the first empirical test to include key variables from so many theories of international conflict in a single analysis.

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what started out as an apparently straightforward replication project
morphed along the way into something quite different. The end result
is part data management venture, part software development project,
and part gigantic hypothesis testing effort. Most important, perhaps,
we have both undergone a tremendous evolution in our thinking about
the way that the intellectual energies of competing research programs
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