

**International Conflict Data Collection:  
Where have we been and where are we going?**

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The empirical study of armed conflict necessitates the collection and diffusion of valid data across the subfield. Traditionally, the dominant approach by scholars has been to focus on the state as the unit of analysis and emphasize relations across these units. That is, the data has sought to identify the determinants of armed conflict that occurs between states. Recent contributions, however, have begun to diversify the data offerings available to scholars in three ways. First, as the frequency and intensity of interstate conflicts decline, data that emphasizes conflict *within* states is becoming more common. Second, advances in spatial techniques allow scholars to explore the dynamics of conflict processes at the subnational level. Third, there is now a movement to open the “black box” that is the state and explore the influence of domestic politics on the onset and evolution of conflict. In this curated collection we link these data contributions under the theme of “where have we been, and where are we going” – that is, we include works on datasets published in CMPS that fit the state-level/interstate conflict perspective and then highlight work that moves the empirical study of armed conflict in new directions (such as shifting the unit of analysis to subnational areas, examining internal wars, and analyzing public opinion).<sup>1</sup>

### **Where Have We Been?**

The study of international conflict has made tremendous progress in many ways over the years. Much of these advancements have been made by quantitative analyses (Cusack 1995; Geller and Singer 1998; Kadera and Zinnes 2012). Early quantitative analyses of conflict used poor research designs plagued with a variety of problems such as selection on the dependent variable, inattention to necessary and sufficient conditions, and state-level units of analysis that could not shed light on interactions between countries (Most and Starr 1989). In the past three decades, these limitations have been largely overcome through a variety of methodological improvements. In particular, scholars employing quantitative analyses have focused on dyadic analyses, particularly since Bremer’s (1992) pioneering analysis of dangerous dyads. In this section we identify the studies that collectively highlight traditional research on international conflict, and note how each study advances our understanding of the causes of international conflict.

Quantitative analyses place a heavy demand for data, and data collection has been at the heart of many advances in the study of international conflict over the years (Hensel 2012). Some data collections seek to identify cases for analysis. For example, the Correlates of War Project’s state system membership list provides a commonly agreed upon set of sovereign states (Correlates of War Project 2017). One approach to case selection is to identify dyads that have the *opportunity*

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<sup>1</sup> We italicize the names of the authors whose works appear in this collection.

for international conflict and analyze only those dyads, rather than all pairs of states. In keeping with this approach, *Quackenbush* (2006) develops the concept of politically active dyads. To identify active dyads, *Quackenbush* focuses on contiguity, power status, and alliances. *Quackenbush* finds that politically active dyads provide a significant improvement over previous measures of opportunity, namely regional dyads, politically relevant dyads, and the politically relevant international environment.

Given that a critical step in research design is accurately conceptualizing international conflict, it is reasonable that there are a variety of ways to identify international conflict including war. A common conception of international conflict is the militarized interstate dispute, which involves the threat, display, or use of military force between states. This provides a broader conception of international conflict than just wars, which are typically defined as events involving at least 1,000 battle deaths. It also helps to make the rare events problem in the data less severe, as there are thousands of disputes but only a couple hundred wars. The militarized interstate disputes (MID) data were first introduced by Gochman and Maoz (1984). The latest update is introduced by *Palmer, et al.* (2015), who provide an overview of the latest update of the Militarized Interstate Disputes dataset. This version 4 update covers the time period 2002-2010, and provides comprehensive coverage of the period from 1816-2010. One consequence of focusing on MIDs to identify conflict is that it necessitates a focus on *interstate* conflict, as extrastate and intrastate conflicts are not included in the data.

Identifying factors associated with conflict is also of crucial importance. These factors have often been called correlates of war, leading to the name of the broadest data collection enterprise in the study of international conflict. Territorial issues have been identified as the most conflict-prone type of issue and one of the strongest factors associated with conflict. There are several ways to identify territorial issues. One is by using the revision type variable in the MID data, which identifies four categories of issues: territory, policy, regime/government, and other. This classification has proven to be useful in studying the importance of issues on international conflict, but it is limited in several ways. *Gibler* (2017) introduces a new dataset that addresses previous problems related to classification. Rather than simply coding the issue as territory, *Gibler* classifies six categories of territorial issues: “(1) disputed ownership, (2) general border issues, (3) opportunity-based conflict, (4) state-system changes, (5) border violations, and (6) fishing rights and the hot pursuit of rebels” (*Gibler* 2017, 194).

Another approach to identifying issues is provided by the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) project, which has a long history of striving to identify and categorize contentious issues beyond simply territory. *Hensel and Mitchell* (2016) expand the original collection (Hensel’s 2001 ICOW collection only covered the Americas from 1816 to 1992) to cover the entire world from 1816 to 2001. At this point, the ICOW data identify four types of issues: territorial claims, river claims, maritime claims, and identity claims. While territorial, river, and maritime claims were introduced by earlier versions of the ICOW data, identity claims provide an important step in a new direction. Identity claims cover situations where one state challenges another state in order to support or demand “better treatment or equality for its ethnic kin in the target state, or may go further to demand regional autonomy, independence, or even unification with the challenger state itself” (*Hensel and Mitchell* 2016, 134). The importance of issues as sources of international conflict suggests that identifying how issues can be resolved is an important part of a complete

model of conflict. To enable this, ICOW also collects data on attempts to resolve issue claims by various means: militarized means, bilateral negotiations, non-binding third-party mediation, and binding third-party adjudication.

Another important step forward in the study of territorial issues is made possible by *Owsiak, Cuttner, and Buck* (forthcoming), who introduce the International Border Agreements dataset. This dataset identifies international legal agreements that lead to the full or partial resolution of border issues between states. *Owsiak, Cuttner, and Buck* identify the actors involved in the settlement (e.g., whether third parties are involved), the methods used to reach the agreement (e.g., negotiation, arbitration, post-war conferences, plebiscites, etc.), and whether the outcome is a full or intermediate agreement. This dataset covers the time period 1816-2001 and provides an important improvement in our ability to study territorial issues. As with the ICOW data, the International Border Agreements data enable researchers to study not only how territorial issues lead to conflict, but also how they can be resolved.

Altogether, these pieces represent a broad snapshot of how scholars have improved the traditional study of interstate conflict with modern data collection techniques and methodological innovations. Though certainly not representative of all international conflict efforts, these pieces shed light on where the discipline has been.

### **Where Are We Going?**

As the dyadic study of interstate interactions has matured, a diverse set of new research programs have progressed that are predicated on opening the “black box” of the state. In this sense, the data efforts that have been developed to promote these research programs prioritize disaggregation. That is, they identify differences that exist within and across states, differentiate armed conflicts based on combatant motives and war dynamics, account for differences across rebel organizations, seek to link public opinion and the characteristics of domestic institutions to state behavior, and also investigate the extent to which political processes might vary across geographic space. The common theme, then, is an effort to move beyond the state in order to better understand the incentive structures and constraints that shape the decision-making process, while also acknowledging that these incentives and constraints vary across and within states.

Importantly, these new data efforts should not be viewed as a replacement to the dyadic work performed by scholars of international politics – indeed, as highlighted in the previous section, this remains a very active and fruitful area for research. Rather, the opening of the “black box” is a complement to this work as it allows for a deeper investigation into underlying processes. We may know based on dyadic research, for example, that territorial disputes are prone to escalation. But to better understand why this is the case, and why a majority of these disputes do not escalate, it becomes necessary to emphasize depth over breadth. Or, stated differently, it becomes necessary to disaggregate the state to such an extent that differences can be identified and subsequently linked to variations in state behavior. The five data projects highlighted in this section of the collection, though not an exhaustive list, are examples of efforts that will allow scholars to do just that.

Inherent in this move towards disaggregation has been a growing interest in the onset and dynamics of intrastate conflict. This is driven in part by the fact that civil wars are now the most common and destructive form of conflict in the international system (Gleditsch et al. 2002). But it is also the product of the finding that domestic unrest at home is intimately related to patterns of state behavior, especially conflict propensity (Gleditsch et al. 2008; Salehyan 2008; Schultz 2010; Reeder 2014). By opening up the “black box” that is the state, therefore, scholars have established a very consequential interdependence between interstate conflict and ongoing political violence domestically, something that was predicted by Bremer (2000) and has been lamented by others (see Sambanis 2002).

Traditionally, scholars have treated all civil wars as being the same and being comprised of two central conflict actors: “the rebels” and “the government.” We know from empirical examples, however, that these conflicts are never this simple – they are fought for different reasons, over different issues, at different times, and in different places. In addition, groups engaged in violence are motivated by wide-ranging factors, and vary greatly on their ability to mobilize forces, capture resources, and maintain third-party sponsorship. *Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan* (2013) take on the latter concern by creating data on non-state actors involved in civil wars. This allows scholars to account for these differences and link them to the dynamic and outcomes of these wars. *Bartusevicius* (2016) is concerned with the former, and provides measures that allow scholars to leverage differences that exist across conflicts to better understand why wars arise and how they evolve in the ways they do.

These intrastate conflicts also tend to be highly localized, with a significant proportion of violence taking place, and then recurring, at the same locations. Such spatial patterns imply that there is something about these particular locations that differentiate them from others. *Shaver, Carter, and Shawa* (forthcoming) provide a dataset on local-level terrain ruggedness and land cover. In the absence of local-level data, terrain has traditionally been measured at the state-level by estimating the percentage of a state’s territory that is covered by mountains and/or forests. By introducing nuanced local-level data, the authors afford scholars the freedom to synthesize this data with other geo-referenced data in the quest to better understand the local dynamics of civil war violence – a research program that has the potential to enhance the standing of the field by making it more policy relevant.

Scholars are also becoming more and more interested in how public opinion, political institutions, constitutional arrangements, and elections influence domestic stability and foreign policy. *Regan, Frank, and Clark* (2009) introduce two new datasets produced by the Institutions and Elections project that include 127 different variables on these factors. In this way, this project represents a significant contribution to understanding how domestic factors might shape state behavior. In a similar vein, *Heffington, Park, and Williams* (forthcoming) introduce a dataset on Americans’ issue importance at the individual-level from 1939-2015. With the use of the “most important problem facing the country” question, *Heffington, Park, and Williams* (forthcoming) produce estimates of the percentage of Americans concerned about foreign policy (and other) issues. By demonstrating how Americans respond to foreign policy actions (such as crises, terror events, or wars) at the individual and aggregate level, this dataset allows scholars to test fundamental theories of international conflict (such as diversionary theory or domestic audience costs).

## **Conclusion**

The future of international conflict research is bright. The field of international conflict has progressed in clear ways by expanding to study intrastate wars, disaggregating analyses to include spatial patterns, and by analyzing public opinion responses. Part of the reason why the future is so promising is that more recent pieces are building on a strong foundation built by scholars devoted to the traditional study of international conflict. This collection provides a brief overview of both of these efforts, and in doing so illustrates where we have been and where we are going.

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