

The extent to which there are observable differences among challengers and defenders in their perception of their roles and of the legitimacy of their respective interests is an important theoretical and empirical question that requires systematic analysis. If empirical analysis demonstrates that in a number of "critical" cases, role perceptions converge to obliterate the role differentiation specified by deterrence theories, the utility of the theory becomes questionable. It is these designations of roles that give deterrence theory much of its explanatory and predictive power. At a minimum, our discussion of role perceptions suggests two final working hypotheses for empirical investigation:

10. Deterrence is more likely to fail when the challenger and defender in an immediate deterrence encounter both perceive themselves to be the defender.
11. Deterrence will be more likely to fail when challenger and defender both believe that they are acting in defence of legitimate national interests.

The several sets of variables we have identified are almost all outside of deterrence theory. Only the first variable, the credibility of a commitment, is derived from the theory. But we have relatively little confidence in its explanatory power because our previous empirical investigations of deterrence failures revealed that seemingly credible commitments are challenged. The most elaborate efforts to impart credibility to a commitment may prove insufficient to discourage a challenge when policymakers conceive of a challenge as legitimate, or as the only way of coping with serious strategic or domestic problems.

Policymakers can misperceive the credibility of commitments even when they are not motivated to do so. Commitments, like other signals, only take on meaning in context. If the cultural or political context would-be challengers use to interpret commitments differs from the context in terms of which they were framed by defenders, they can easily be misunderstood.¹⁴²

¹⁴² This aspect of misperception is explored in Robert Jervis, "Perceiving and Coping with Threat," and Lebow, "Conclusions," both in *Psychology and Deterrence*, pp.204-211, and Lebow and Stein, "Beyond Deterrence," pp.18-23.