**Summary: Wormhole Escalation and the Problem of Cross-Domain Reciprocity**

This paper critiques the classical “escalation ladder” metaphor, pioneered by Herman Kahn and Thomas Schelling, which portrays crises as sequential, rational, and reciprocal. That Cold War model assumed that states could calibrate threats and responses in a shared domain and gradually climb or descend a structured path of escalation. However, modern crises increasingly defy this model. Escalation today often occurs through sudden, non-linear leaps across multiple domains—cyber, space, conventional, informational—resulting in dangerous discontinuities rather than gradual intensification.

The article introduces and develops a general theory of **wormhole escalation**, building on Rebecca Hersman’s original concept. Wormholes emerge when three structural conditions are present:

1. **Interpretive Divergence** – states interpret the same action in incompatible ways;
2. **Cross-Domain Translation Failures** – actions in one domain cannot be reciprocated clearly in another;
3. **Velocity Mismatches** – differences in operational tempo (e.g., cyber vs. nuclear) compress decision-making and exacerbate misinterpretation.

Wormholes lead to **recursive escalation**: each misaligned response increases ambiguity and risk, forming a self-reinforcing loop that bypasses traditional rungs of escalation theory.

To illustrate the model, the paper presents three case studies:

* **2017 Qatar Crisis**: A cyberattack leading to diplomatic rupture and blockade, driven by interpretive divergence over a fabricated news report.
* **2019 Balakot Crisis**: A terrorist attack cascaded into cross-border airstrikes between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan, with both sides misreading each other’s intentions.
* **2022 Russo-Ukrainian War**: Cyber, space, and symbolic attacks (e.g., Viasat satellite attack, Kerch Bridge explosion) triggered escalatory leaps beyond conventional military logic.

The core argument is that **reciprocity—the foundation of deterrence—has collapsed** in the multi-domain era. Stability now depends less on arsenals and more on **interpretive infrastructures**: norms, hotlines, doctrinal transparency, and semantic buffers that prevent misinterpretation.

Wormhole escalation is thus not an anomaly but a structural feature of modern conflict. The paper concludes that future deterrence strategies must prioritize the management of meaning, not just military capacity, to prevent inadvertent escalation through misread signals across domains.