Introduction

As neighbours sharing a long and varied border, China and India both take their relationship with each other to be one of the most significant in their foreign policy dealings. Adding the fact that they are world's two most populous countries and two Asian giants, this relationship has important implications for both regional and global affairs. The past few years have especially witnessed an increasing interest in this relationship by the international community, mainly because of the rapid economic growth of both countries and the conspicuous transformation of the relationship itself. There is a fundamental question involved here: What characterises the China-India relationship? Rivalry, alliance or selective cooperation? (Stephen Cohen 2002: 263-264) It is this question that constitutes the foundation of this research.

Good and healthy China-India relationship will contribute not only to the development and prosperity of the two countries themselves, but also to the peace and stability of the region and the world. Nevertheless, the record of the past indicates that this relationship has been rather unsatisfactory. Except for the short period of the “honeymoon” around 1954-55 (Zhou 2006: 187), China-India relations have seen dramatic fluctuations and stalemate of many kinds in the period since the late 1950s, including a direct military conflict in 1962. From the 1980s, some relation-mending efforts by both sides led to a certain alleviation of the hostility. The 1988 visit to China by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi represented a new starting point of the process of normalisation between the two countries. Since then, China-India relations had been gradually normalised through their steady reengagement after a gap of nearly three decades. However, it suffered a serious setback in 1998 when India used the “China Threat” as the justification for its series of nuclear tests. This led to many speculations and suspicions of the future of this
relationship.

Even as the worries about the probable fallout from the new tensions were still there, China-India relationship took a new, and to some extent, an unexpected turn at the beginning of the 21st century. Instead of deteriorating, it has picked up a strong momentum towards maturity. On the political front, the two countries kept frequent exchanges of high-level visits. Prime Minister Vajpayee paid a fruitful state visit to China in June 2003 during which both sides agreed on “comprehensive cooperation” and “promote[ing] a long-term constructive and cooperative partnership”. (Declaration 2003) With the bilateral trade volume touching US$ 24.9 billion in 2006 (Press Office of Ministry of Commerce of the PRC, 2007), the economic ties between the two countries are becoming closer and closer. On the military front, besides the re-instatement of the regular military to military exchanges, the two navies held the first ever joint exercises in November 2003.

What is noteworthy is that all this happened even when the major barriers in China-India relations have not been completely removed. For decades, the border dispute, the so-called “Tibetan Issue” and the “Pakistan Issue” among others, have been the main obstacles. This study intends to explore why China-India relations can improve at this historical juncture. It attempts to analyse the actual impetus behind the transformation of this relationship and furthermore to assess the possibilities of its future development.

With regard to the impetus behind the recent developments in China-India relations, scholars on both sides have offered a range of explanations. Some of them converge while some diverge. So it is with their views on the future of this relationship. Many Indian scholars attributed the improvement of China-India relations to changes of the international system, i.e. the power structure of international community. Some believed that the emerging Sino-Soviet rapprochement since 1986 made it possible
for China and India to rethink their policies toward each other and finally drove Rajiv Gandhi to visit China in 1988. (Ranganathan and Khanna 2004: 59-62) Some argued that the Sino-Soviet rapprochement and the end of the Cold War left India with strategic vulnerabilities, which forced India to reduce the decades-long two-front pressure by “buying” peace with China. (Chellaney in Chellaney 1999: 330) Others contended that the future of this relationship would depend on the evolution of international system, namely, the distribution of power. (Deshpande in Guruswamy 2006: 137-144) Many Chinese scholars highlighted the role of common interests, however. According to Sun Shihai, a Chinese expert on South Asian studies, as the two largest developing nations, both China and India need a peaceful international environment that is favorable for their own economic development. Therefore, “the convergence of their strategic objectives and interests has served as a catalyst for bringing the two Asian nations closer.” (People’s Daily Correspondent 2003) Moreover, their stance on promoting a multi-polar world in the new century has also given them further cause to cooperation. (Xia in SIIS 2002: 111) Believing that their common interests will continue to expand in the 21st century during which a new world order will emerge, the Chinese scholars hold a relatively positive view about the future of China-India relations. (Hongwei Wang 1998: 362-364)

No matter how divergent these opinions are, they in fact converge at the theoretical tool of analysis. With many scholars from both sides emphasising the effects of changes of the power structure or the role of common interests, the study of China-India relations has been dominated by traditional approaches, especially the Realist perspective. In scanning these arguments, however, they fall short of actual explanation. For example, if the improvement of China-India relations can be attributed to changes of the international system, it is difficult to explain why they turned into adversaries from friends in the early 1960s when there was no major structural shift in the Cold War world. Moreover, as many of them overstate the role of common interests, it can lead to the implication that China and India did not share
any significant common interests during the decades of "cold" relations. This is clearly not the case. On the contrary, the two countries could always find commonality, even in the worst period of bilateral relations. In the beginning of 1950's, China and India, two newly independent and populous developing countries, both faced the task of maintaining independence and striving for a bigger say in regional and international affairs. Although their relations took a downturn after the "honeymoon", and they even went to war in 1962, it did not mean the common interest disappeared. What actually changed were their perceptions about each other, i.e., from "friend" to "threat". Therefore, the expansion in their common interests could only be a supplementary rather than a key factor.

Attempting to provide some fresh explanation for China-India relations, this research introduces Constructivism, which emerged at the end of 1980s and has become as popular in international studies as Realism and Liberalism, into its framework of analysis. As Constructivism emphasises that ideas play a significant role in international politics, this research hypothesises that the transformation of China-India relations has been motivated mainly by the changes of their respective security perceptions, i.e., from the Cold War mindset to the post-Cold War new security perspective. Specifically, 1) evolution of international strategic culture has an effect on changes of respective security perceptions of China and India, and vice versa; 2) respective changes of their security perceptions have affected their mutual perceptions; 3) these perception changes have influenced their respective policies toward each other which decide their relations thereby.

By introducing the arguments of Constructivism, Chapter One explains the reason why security perception is selected by this research as the variable to analyse China-India relations. It illustrates how this theory will be applied to the following analysis and what kind of limitations it has. It also sets up a theoretical framework of analysis by elaborating both the contents and the parameters of security perception.
Chapter Two examines the features of China-India respective security perceptions during the Cold War, how they were affected by the then strategic culture of international politics, i.e. the Cold War mindset, with the confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union as its backdrop, and how these security perceptions contributed to the evolution of this relationship during that period.

Chapter Three and Chapter Four respectively deal with security perceptions of China and India since the end of the Cold War. By examining their respective assessments of the security environment and their respective security strategies, the two chapters probe the respective shift of their security perceptions from the Cold War mindset to the new security perspective, though to a different extent, and changes in their mutual perceptions accordingly.

Chapter Five explores how the perception changes have influenced their respective policies toward each other, and how their respective policy adjustments have led to an impressive transformation in their bilateral relations. The last decade of the 20th century witnessed the two countries emerging from their three-decades cold relationship and replacing it with a normal one. In spite of the brief hiatus after Pokhran II, China-India relations not only resumed a year later but also started a new phase of comprehensive cooperation and marched ahead along the track of "constructive and cooperative partnership".

Chapter Six draws a conclusion of this research's findings and outcome and makes a prediction of the future of China-India relations accordingly.