

All too often, the public discourse on the conflicting claims to territorial sovereignty and maritime jurisdiction in the South China Sea renders an already complex subject even more complicated. The mass media and some academic commentators, who should know better, help this trend along by perpetuating, in the face of the facts and realities, certain myths related to the disputes. Some of these myths reflect nationalist sentiments in their purveyors' respective countries, expressed in public demonstrations and in traditional and non-traditional channels of communication. Indeed, some of them may have their roots in nationalist motivations.



A discussion of some of these myths and the contrary realities follows.

Myth #1: Disputes in the South China Sea over territorial sovereignty or maritime jurisdiction can be “resolved” soon.

Aside from legal considerations, three factors stand today in the way of the compromises and reciprocal concessions that are essential for a negotiated settlement of most international disputes. One of these factors is the strengthening and diversification of a variety of internal political forces, together with the broadening and deepening of these forces' influence on national decision-making. The broadening and deepening of influence on decision-making are, in turn, a result of the opening up of societies to more and more expressions of public sentiment and also of the development and use of information technology for those expressions. The second factor is the shortened tenures, and, therefore, the increased insecurity, of many national decision-makers. The third factor, exacerbated by the first two, is the intractability of what national policy-makers and those who influence them consider as the vital interests of their nations – or at least say publicly that they so consider them. These factors are getting increasingly difficult to overcome. The first two factors are rather self-evident. The third one is often overlooked.

The South China Sea: Ten myths and ten realities, by Rodolfo C Severino

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In the case of the South China Sea, the individual claimants, as well as the United States as the global super-power, have national interests that clash and are incompatible with one another. The U. S., for example, does not wish to see any single power dominating East Asia. It insists on its freedom to use the sea, including the exclusive economic zone, especially the one projected from China's main coastline, to obtain sensitive and secret information. A related consideration is the freedom of navigation and overflight to protect international trade and military deployments, particularly the U. S.' own.

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