

**PRIME MINISTER ABE HAS DONE WELL IN MANAGING DIFFERENT FACTIONS**

# Navigating Japan's complex political landscape

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been in the international spotlight in recent weeks, first for his historic address to the United States Congress and later for his government's approval of Bills that would see Japan's military play a greater security role internationally. In both cases, what is perhaps less known is how Mr Abe has had to navigate a challenging domestic political landscape dominated by powerful factions to push through his agenda.

Mr Abe belonged to the Seiwai-kai (short form for Seiwai Seisaku Kenkyukai), a powerful faction within the ruling Liberal Democracy Party (LDP) that commands the largest number of LDP parliamentarians in power. Mr Abe rode on popular support within the Seiwai-kai in September 2012 to become the LDP leader, out-manoeuvring Mr Shigeru Ishiba, a hawkish politician who has advocated a stronger military posture in the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute with China and against North Korea.

After coming into power, Mr Abe suspended his membership in the Seiwai-kai faction, keeping with the tradition that the country's Prime Minister should not have formal links to any political factions. But most observers believe he retains a large influence in this powerful faction. This is evident in Mr Abe's appointment of a close associate, Mr Hiroyuki Hosoda, as the faction's leader. Mr Hosoda shares Mr Abe's belief in the need for reforms in the agricultural sector for Japan's eventual entry into the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade pact.

By appointing Mr Hosoda, Mr Abe has also put a curb on the influence of Mr Nobutaka Machimura, who led the Seiwai-kai faction before the Prime Minister made him speaker of the Lower House.

## PLAYING FACTIONS AGAINST EACH OTHER

Mr Abe's crafty power play is also evident in how he played off the next two largest LDP factions that have sought to challenge Seiwai-Kai.

The rivalry between the moderate Kochikai and Heisei-ken factions has



diluted the chances of them coming together to challenge the more conservative stance favoured by Seiwai-kai and Mr Abe.

At the same time, Mr Abe has sought to appease both Kochikai and Heisei-ken by giving Cabinet and party positions to their leaders, who are Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida and LDP secretary-general Sadakazu Tanigaki respectively. Both factions now do not pose a challenge to Mr Abe or his Seiwai-kai.

In turn, Kochikai helps Mr Abe by acting as a balance against the power of another faction — Heisei-ken — led by veteran politician Fukushima Nukaga. Heisei-ken is numerically the second largest in LDP, but it has featured less prominently in Mr Abe's Cabinet than Kochikai.

Divisions between Kochikai and Heisei-ken mean that by and large, the moderates' dovish stance on foreign affairs, particularly in terms of China ties and collective self-defence, cannot be mobilised adequately to challenge Mr Abe's conservative agenda.

Mr Abe's shrewd power-play is apparent in how he taps on various LDP factions that have cosy ties with the opposition party, the Democratic Par-

**Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (centre) with members of the ruling LDP Party holding Daruma dolls, which are believed to bring good luck, during the party's convention in March. Mr Abe's shrewd power-play has allowed him to neutralise challenges from his rivals and counterbalance factions against one another.**

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ty of Japan (DPJ) and LDP's coalition partner Komeito, to manage these two groups.

For example, Komeito leader Natsuo Yamaguchi is known to have a close working relationship with Heisei-ken factional leader Tanigaki.

Through such informal relationships, LDP can maintain ties and relationships with other allied or opposition parties.

Heisei-ken, Komeito and DPJ share similar moderate worldviews and a pacifist stance when it comes to the role of the Japanese military. In some ways, they regard themselves as the vanguard of Japan's liberal, dovish and pacifist conscience to check on the excesses of right-leaning conservatism.

This works to Mr Abe's advantage because he can mobilise the LDP moderates to check on the hardcore conservatives within his party such as Mr Shigeru Ishiba, the party's No 2 official and a potential key challenger to Mr Abe's leadership of LDP.

Mr Ishiba favours a robust role for the Japanese military in self-defence and collective self-defence and is not afraid to publicly disagree with Mr Abe, a trait that is taboo in Japanese politics. Mr Abe's toughest chal-

lenge, however, lies in working with the most right-leaning conservative allies (e.g. LDP politician Tomomi Inada) who sometimes make statements against the TPP.

Mr Abe has had to keep a close watch on conservatives such as Ms Inada to prevent them from making statements that may hurt his careful and meticulous consensus-building process within the party for major policy initiatives.

In the overall analysis, Mr Abe has done well in navigating the challenging domestic political landscape. Unlike former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who sought to curtail the power of LDP intra-party factions and seek direct public support for his reform policies in electoral polls, Mr Abe prefers to reach broad consensus among the spectrum of political factions in undertaking reforms on the economic and security fronts.

In doing so, he has neutralised challenges from his rivals by mobilising his old Seiwai-kai faction and counterbalancing factions against one another. Partly because of the success of his factional strategies, Mr Abe has become the Prime Minister with one of the longest tenures in power in post-war Japan.