

**Up-to-date Documents on Local Autonomy in Japan No.3**

**The Debate on the Introduction of  
a Regional System in Japan**

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## Foreword

The Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) and the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) have been working since 2005 on a “Project on the overseas dissemination of information on the local governance system of Japan and its operation”. On the basis of the recognition that the dissemination to overseas countries of information on the Japanese local governance system and its operation was insufficient, the objective of this project was defined as the pursuit of comparative studies on local governance by means of compiling in foreign languages materials on the Japanese local governance system and its implementation as well as by accumulating literature and reference materials on local governance in Japan and foreign countries.

In 2007, as a continuation of projects which were begun in 2005, we continued to compile “Statistics on Local Governance (Japanese/English)” and to conduct a search for literature and reference materials concerned with local governance in Japan and overseas to be stored in the Institute for Comparative Studies in Local Governance (COSLOG). We also compiled a “Glossary on Local Governance Used in Japanese Official Gazettes (Japanese/English) (FY 2007 Edition)”. In addition, continuing from the previous year, we finished compiling “Up-to-date Documents on Local Autonomy in Japan” on two themes and “Papers on the Local Governance System and its Implementation in Selected Fields in Japan”, for which we took up 6 themes.

This project is to be continued in 2008, and we aim to improve the materials so that they will be of real use and benefit to those who are working in the field of local governance.

If you have any comments, suggestions or inquiries regarding our project, please feel free to contact the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) or the Institute for Comparative Studies in Local Governance (COSLOG) of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS).

March 2008

Michihiro Kayama  
Chairman of the Board of Directors  
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Tatsuo Hatta  
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## Preface

This booklet is one of the results of research activities conducted by the Institute for Comparative Studies in Local Governance (COSLOG) in 2007 as one part of a 5-year project that started in 2005 entitled “Project on the overseas dissemination of information on the local governance system of Japan and its operation”, sponsored by the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR). For the purpose of implementing this project, a “Research committee for the project on the overseas dissemination of information on the local governance system of Japan and its operation” has been set up, and a chief and deputy chiefs with responsibility for the project have been designated from among the members concerned with each research subject.

“Up-to-date Documents on Local Autonomy in Japan” (2007, Volumes 3-4) were written under the responsibility of the following two members:

(Chief)

Kiyotaka Yokomichi, Professor of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies

(Deputy Chief)

Hiroshi Ikawa, Professor of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies

This booklet, the third volume in the series, was written by Professor Yokomichi on the subject of the debate concerning the introduction of a regional system in Japan.

In Japan, this debate has become one of the major issues in the context of local government system reforms, along with the continuing advance of municipal mergers. This booklet introduces the history of the debate concerning the introduction of a regional system as well as recent movements directed toward realizing such a system in Japan.

We will continue to take up new topics, and add to the series.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to Professor Yokomichi, and also to other members of the research committee for their expert opinions and advice.

March 2008

Hiroshi Ikawa

Chairperson

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# **The Debate on the Introduction of a Regional System in Japan**

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## **1 Introduction — From mergers of municipalities to the introduction of a regional system**

In recent years in Japan, mergers between municipalities have undergone very significant developments. In March 1999, there were 3,232 municipalities in Japan, but by March 2006, this number had been reduced by 44% to a total of 1,821. This major change completely justified the appellation of The Great Heisei Consolidation. It is furthermore anticipated that by the time of the expiry of the New Municipal Merger Law in March 2010, there will be still further municipal mergers. (Note 1)

Given that the process of municipal mergers has developed to the extent outlined above, the time has now come to examine what should happen with prefectures which encompass a large geographical area. Specifically, as a result of the fact that merged municipalities have become larger in size, the need has arisen to reexamine the allocation of roles, and to look again at the distribution of responsibilities and the distribution of authority between municipalities and prefectures respectively. It has also been suggested that there may be a need to reexamine the land area of prefectures.

At the present time, the debate that is developing is concerned with whether or not, taking as a basis the system of prefectures as it currently exists, this system as such should be abolished, and a new system of regional autonomous bodies, covering a wider area than prefectures, should be introduced.

Since the modern system of local government was introduced into Japan in 1888, the prefectures have existed in their present form, and the total number of 47 has remained unchanged. This is in contrast to the situation at the level of municipalities, the basic units of local government, where during the same period, municipalities have experienced 3 large consolidations, including the Great Heisei Consolidation, as a result of which the number of municipalities has greatly decreased, while the size of each has expanded.

The debate on the system of regions is concerned with abolishing this system of prefectures, which has remained stable over the long period of 120 years, and creating large administrative entities, the area of which exceeds that of the present-day prefectures. The present debate centers on the fact that such a reform

would not simply mean changing the size of local government bodies, but would bring with it the possibility of having a significant influence on the Japanese nation-state as such in terms of the relationship between the central and local government.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the debate, including its historical development, concerning the introduction of a system of regions (do-shu-sei) in Japan.

## **2 The history of the debate over regions**

As explained above, the current system of 47 prefectures has been a very stable one, but this does not mean that there has been no debate until now about revising it. On the contrary, this kind of debate was going on even before World War II, and became quite heated at one point during the 1950s. It has come to the forefront again in recent years, as mergers of municipalities have developed.

### **2 – 1 The pre-war debate**

With regard to the pre-war debate about the introduction of a system of regions, the most notable proposal to introduce such a system is the plan for administrative reform put forward under the Cabinet of Prime Minister Giichi Tanaka. An overview of this plan now follows.

1. Establish regions with a land area encompassing several prefectures, namely:
  - Tokyo Region, Sendai Region, Nagoya Region, Osaka Region, Hiroshima Region, and Fukuoka Region.
  - If Hokkaido is added, this makes a total of 7 regions
2. Establishing a regional office within each region, and appointing a head of each region.
  - Selecting the most important area within each region for the location of the regional office. Specifically, the 6 cities of Tokyo, Sendai, Nagoya, Osaka, Hiroshima and Fukuoka.
3. Give existing prefectures the status of pure local autonomous bodies, and publicly elect the head of the executive organ (governor).

A precondition for understanding the theory underlying this kind of regional system is in the first instance an understanding of the system of local government that existed before World War II. Under the prewar system, municipalities (cities, towns and villages) existed as local government bodies, and above these were

prefectures, which had a dual character. On the one hand, they were units of local government, and at the same time, they were local administrative organs of the state. Specifically, at the same time as they carried out the responsibilities of a local government body with a publicly elected assembly, they also functioned as administrative organs of central government under the direction of a governor dispatched from the Ministry of the Interior. Putting this another way, the governor dispatched from central government also performed the duties of the head of a local government body.

This concept of regions saw prefectures with their dual character as having only the character of local autonomous bodies, like that of municipalities, while above them, newly established regions would function as local administrative organs of the state. Specifically, the thinking envisaged a 3-tier local system of regions (local administrative organs of the state), prefectures (local government bodies) and municipalities (local government bodies).

Under the system as described here, the governor of a prefecture would be publicly elected in the same way as the mayor of a city, town or village (municipality), and the duties of a prefecture would include, in addition to the hitherto existing duties of an autonomous local government body, as many as possible of the duties previously carried out in the capacity of an administrative organ of central government, with the exception of policing duties. On the other hand, the regions, since they would act as the administrative organs of central government, would have no regional assembly, and the chief officer of the region would be dispatched by central government, and would perform the duties of supervising the prefectures and the municipalities.

With regard to the prefectures, under the reform plan, they would have a devolved structure, and since they would no longer be serving as the organs of central government, they would have a publicly elected governor and prefectural assembly, and would carry out a wide range of duties as local government bodies. However, the regions on the other hand, since they would be local administrative organs of central government and not local government bodies, would be part of a centralized system and have the responsibility of supervising prefectures and municipalities.

In Japan as a whole, it was envisaged that, including Hokkaido, there would be 7 regions. With regard to Shikoku, a particular characteristic of the plan was that, reflecting the state of communications at that time, the 3 prefectures of Kagawa, Tokushima and Kochi would be included in the Osaka Region, while Ehime Prefecture would be included in the Hiroshima Region.

In addition to the above plan, various other regional systems were proposed in the prewar period, including a 2-tier system under which prefectures would be abolished, leaving regions (local administrative organs of central government) and municipalities (local government bodies). Taking an overview of the proposed prewar regional systems, it is noticeable that many of them showed centralizing tendencies, with regions acting as local administrative organs of the state (Note 2).

## **2 – 2 Regional systems proposed in the 1950s – The Report of the 4th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems**

When we enter the 1950s, we see the re-emergence of a lively debate over the introduction of a regional system. In the background to the debate at this time, 4 factors can be cited: (a) the claim that the land area of a prefecture is too limited (particularly from the point of view of national land and comprehensive development); (b) the demand for enhanced administrative efficiency; (c) the progress made in the area of municipal mergers (the Great Showa Consolidation); and (d) the impoverished nature of prefectural finances.

The debate over the introduction of a regional system came to a peak on October 18, 1957, with the publication in that year of the report of The 4th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems, entitled “Report on the Reform of Local Government Systems”. This report (“Local Regions” draft), which supports the introduction of a regional system, was adopted by the use of the unusual method of a majority vote, but a minority report (“Merger of Prefectures” draft) was also appended.

### **2 – 2 – 1 “Local Regions” draft (Majority opinion)**

The majority opinion, which was adopted in the report mentioned above, begins by making the following comments about the size of prefectures: “A striking imbalance has arisen between prefectures in terms of the ability required to implement a modern system of administration, and there are many cases where the existing area of prefectures is too small to enable administrative projects that cover a wide area, such as resource development or land conservation to be dealt with in a rational manner. Moreover, if we also look at this situation from the perspective of efficiently managing highly sophisticated administration as well as from that of reducing administrative costs, it is reasonable to presume that it is much more rational to deal with such administrative matters within the context of a much larger land area.”

With regard next to the character of prefectures, the report continues as follows:



“The larger part of the work carried out by prefectures has the character of work that should be categorized as being part of the state as a whole, and despite the fact that this tendency is at last being seen as a trend to be taken forward, changes in the character of prefectures since World War II and accompanying these, the string of reforms of prefectural systems in such ways as the public election of the prefectural governor, may be insufficient in terms of safeguarding cooperative relations between central and local government and maintaining a set level of administration in the country as a whole”.

Following these comments, the report presented its conclusion in the following terms, advocating the abolition of prefectures and the introduction of regions as something to be welcomed: “Abolishing the existing system of prefectures and setting up between central government and municipalities a “block”, which would fulfill the dual function of being an intermediate body and of being a comprehensive local outreach organ of central government, would, by means of such methods as having one and the same person, with necessary support staff, be responsible for carrying out both functions, provide a guarantee of unified, comprehensive management. In this way, the establishment of a comprehensive line of administrative management running from the state at the center through to local government entities can be considered as the most appropriate method to be adopted from the perspective both of satisfying the demand for more efficient administration and properly arranging relations between the center and local government in a way that is appropriate to the state of the nation.”

The specific content of the regional system (“Local Regions”) as shown in the report is as follows:

1. Abolish the existing system of prefectures.
2. Set up an intermediate body between the state (central government) and municipalities.
  - (1) Let the name of this intermediate body be “Local Region” (provisional name).
  - (2) Let the “Local Region” have the character both of a local autonomous body and an organ of the state.
  - (3) Regarding the area to be encompassed by the “Local Region”, let the area of each region be one of 7 to 9 “blocks” or groupings dividing up the country as a whole, taking into consideration in a comprehensive way, natural, social economic and cultural factors.

In principle, such areas of “Local Regions” are to be decided without splitting up the area of a prefecture.

- (4) Establish an assembly as the decision-making organ of each “Local Region”.
  - (5) Establish a “Head of the Local Region” (provisional name) as the executive organ of each “Local Region”.
    - Let the “Head of the Local Region” be appointed by the Prime Minister with the consent of the assembly of each “Local Region”. The status of the said person shall be that of a national public servant.
  - (6) The “Local Region” shall carry out those functions transferred to it from the functions currently carried out by the state (national government) as well as those functions currently carried out by prefectures that cannot be transferred to municipalities.
  - (7) The functions carried out by currently existing outreach organs of central government shall be transferred as far as at all possible to the “Local Region”, and the existing outreach organs shall be abolished.
  - (8) From among the functions currently carried out by prefectures, those functions that can be transferred to municipalities shall as far as possible be so transferred.
3. A “Local Regional Office” (provisional name) shall be put in place as a comprehensive outreach organ of central government to exercise jurisdiction over the area of a “Local Region”.
- (1) The “Head of the Local Region” shall be the head of “the Local Regional Office”.
  - (2) Those functions of national outreach organs that cannot be transferred to a “Local Region” shall in principle be integrated with a “Local Regional Office”.

The intention of this plan was to introduce the regional system in the form of regions which would have the character of local autonomous bodies as well as that of central government. The appointment of the head of the “Local Region” has to have the approval of the assembly, but since the appointee has the character of a national public servant and is designated by central government, it is fair to say that the intention was to revive the prewar prefectural system in the form of a regional “bloc”.

It is possible to discern in the proposal to introduce a regional system an intention to order and unify national outreach organs. Specifically, when we look

at the functions carried out by national outreach organs, we see that as far as possible these should be transferred to the “Local Regions” and that existing local outreach organs should be abolished. Moreover, with regard to functions that cannot be transferred, these should, as far as possible, be integrated into the national comprehensive local outreach organ, the “Local Regional Office”. In addition, it is clear from the fact that the head of the “Local Region” is to be designated as the head of the “Local Regional Office”, that the intention was to guarantee unified, comprehensive management under one and the same person.

### **2 – 2 – 2 “Merger of Prefectures” draft (Minority Opinion)**

In contrast to the above proposal, the minority opinion in the report was expressed as follows: “We have the deepest respect for the fundamental spirit of the local government system which totally renewed the appearance of postwar Japan, and we evaluate very highly the role that this system has played in establishing democratic government in Japan. We therefore believe that the keystone of reform must be placed on extending this system still further. On the basis of this fundamental presumption, it is appropriate to limit reform to the absolute minimum that is necessary to establish a system that will correct faults in the existing system and at the same time, respond to demands for a modern system of administration.” The minority opinion continued: “The result of recent mergers between municipalities is that, by and large, municipalities have now reached an appropriate size, and their financial strength has markedly improved, but it is impossible to deny that at the present stage, there are still tasks which cannot be dealt with appropriately by municipalities, and it seems unavoidable that for a while, prefectures will be responsible for supplementing the ability of municipalities in a transitional fashion.” With comments such as these, the minority opinion in the report argued that prefectures should continue to maintain their present role as local autonomous bodies.

The above said, the minority opinion admitted that some expansion of the size of prefectures was needed, and proposed a “merger of prefectures”, whereby 3 or 4 prefectures would be unified, resulting in a reduction from the existing number of 47 to between 15 and 17.

### **2 – 2 – 3 Differences between the two approaches**

The differences between the two approaches, the majority opinion favoring “Local Regions” and the minority opinion favoring the “merger of prefectures” were succinctly expressed in the following words of Shigeo Miyoshi, a member of the 4th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems.

“The proposal to unify prefectures into groupings of 3 or 4 prefectures is based

on the idea that local government autonomy at prefectural level is essential for local autonomy. Putting things in a rather extreme way, the presumption is that on the basis of this fundamental thinking, prefectures must continue to be completely autonomous. However, under the “Local Regions” proposal, the important point is that local government autonomy should be strengthened in municipalities as the basic units of local government, while, speaking frankly, it doesn’t matter if prefectures have no autonomy. One other important difference is that under the “Merger of Prefectures” proposal, any revision would only be to the existing prefectural system. However, under the “Local Regions” proposal, revision would not stop there; rather, the question that would be asked is how, on the basis of a state-oriented or centralist standpoint, a unified administrative structure, moving away from the present state of Japan, could be brought about. And at the same time, as I have already indicated, municipalities would be strengthened as the basic units of local government. The thinking that underlies this proposal is of a system that rests on these two pillars.” (Note 3).

#### **2 – 2 – 4 Subsequent developments**

The “Local Regions” plan issued by the 4th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems did not subsequently reach realization and was left as it was. However, in connection with the “Merger of Prefectures” plan, that formed the basis of the minority opinion, in 1962, proposals to merge 2 groups of 3 prefectures each in central Japan (Group 1: Aichi prefecture, Gifu prefecture and Mie prefecture ; Group 2: Osaka prefecture, Nara prefecture and Wakayama prefecture) were put forward.

In addition, as a kind of response to these movements, in 1965, the 10th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems produced a “Report on the Merger of Prefectures”, and after receiving the report, the government submitted to the Diet in the following year, 1966, the draft of a Special Law on the Merger of Prefectures. However, neither of the merger proposals by the two groups of prefectures mentioned above got as far as being realized, and the draft submitted to the Diet did not pass into law.

#### **2 – 3 Discussions on a regional system in recent years – The idea is reinvigorated**

Spurred by the growth of decentralization and the development of mergers between municipalities, the debate about the introduction of a regional system has once again become increasingly lively.

Since 2000, many different kinds of bodies including political parties, economic

organizations and think tanks, have put together and publicized their ideas on a regional system. In addition, ideas relating to a regional system have begun to be examined both within prefectures themselves and within the National Governors' Association (NGA), a nation-wide organization of Governors of all prefectures.

Within the context of movements such as those described here, particular note should be taken of the report produced by the Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems, which was set up in response to a request from the Prime Minister.

In 2003, the 27th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems issued a "Report concerning the Future System of Local Government" (November 13, 2003), in which a basic framework for a regional system was put forward. Following this, in 2006, the 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems issued a "Report concerning the Regional System" (February 28, 2006), in which an even more specific design for a regional system that might be adopted was set out.

### **3 The 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems: "Report concerning the Regional System"**

In this chapter, I would like to give a detailed introduction to the "Report concerning the Regional System", issued by the 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems (February 28, 2006), since it marks an epoch in recent discussions on the introduction of a regional system.

#### **3 – 1 The thinking regarding the introduction of a regional system**

The report says firstly, regarding the current prefectural system, that for a period of around 120 years, prefectures have maintained their composition and area, but asks whether change is possible in response to socio-economic developments such as the development of municipal mergers and the increase in administrative projects covering a large area in excess of the area of current prefectures, and raises the question whether the current system is appropriate for ongoing decentralization reform.

Next, in response to these issues, the report says that while maintaining the system of prefectures, it is possible to think of dealing with the issues by means of such methods as wide-area alliances or prefectural mergers, but if this route is pursued further, wide-area local government reform will have to be located not simply in the context of responding to problems concerned with the prefectural system, but in that of reevaluating the nature of the nation of Japan. Specifically, the thinking set out in the report is to reconsider, through the medium of wide-area reform, the mutual relationship that exists between central and local

government, to restrict the roles of central government to what must properly be performed by the state, and in terms of domestic administration to take as a basis what can very broadly be carried out by local governments.

And the conclusion reached in the report is that, if this perspective is adopted, the introduction of a regional system (do-shu-sei) can be thought of as appropriate in terms of a specific measure for realizing wide-area local government reform.

### **3 – 2 The direction of a regional system plan**

The report says that a concrete system plan for a regional system should be carried out in line with the following 3 directions.

#### **(1) Development of decentralization and strengthening of local autonomy**

In the event that a regional system is introduced, there should be a systematic review, on the basis of the principles of subsidiarity and proximity of the respective roles to be carried out by central government, wide-area local government and basic local government.

After that review, devolution should be carried out on a massive scale from central government to wide-area local government, and from wide-area local government to basic local government.

#### **(2) Realization of a land area with autonomy and vitality**

In the event that a regional system is introduced, in order to correct the status of Tokyo as a national land structure of extreme concentration, and make a reality of a land area that has both autonomy and vitality, and so that regions can carry out their role within their land area as political and administrative entities, it is necessary to radically reassess the distribution of duties between central and local government and put in place a regional system equipped with functions, structures and financial powers appropriate to this role.

#### **(3) Construction of an efficient administrative system running through central and local government**

In the event that a regional system is introduced, to enhance the efficiency of administration from national through to local level and to clarify the location of responsibility, regions should be able to implement the duties attached to their role in a consistent way from the initial planning formulation stage through to the implementation stage.

Moreover, efforts should be made to determine and to realize, by means of reductions in national administrative organizations and the reorganization of duties moving from prefectures to regions, a reduction in number of both organizations and personnel and a reduction in administrative costs from

national through to local level.

### **3 – 3 The basic system plan for regions**

On the basis of the 3 directions outlined above, the report sets out as shown below the basic system plan for regions.

#### (1) Setting up the location of a region

- Locate in place of a prefecture a wide-area region (do-shu) that will have the status of a local autonomous body
- Let the local government system consist of 2 layers, regions and municipalities.

#### (2) The land area of a region

- Make the basis of the land area of a region a wide area that encompasses several prefectures.

However, in the case of Hokkaido and Okinawa, taking into account their geographical characteristics and historical circumstances, it is reasonable to think of the land area of a region as that of the prefecture alone.

- Taking note of the outreach offices of central government, show 3 examples in which the land area of regions is basically in conformity with their jurisdictional area. (Reference document 1)
- 9 region plan  
Hokkaido, Tohoku, Kita Kanto-ShinEtsu, Minami Kanto, Chubu, Kansai, Chugoku-Shikoku, Kyushu, Okinawa.
- 11 region plan  
Hokkaido, Tohoku, Kita Kanto, Minami Kanto, Hokuriku, Tokai, Kansai, Chugoku, Shikoku, Kyushu, Okinawa
- 13 region plan  
Hokkaido, Kita Tohoku, Minami Tohoku, Kita Kanto, Minami Kanto, Hokuriku, Tokai, Kansai, Chugoku, Shikoku, Kita Kyushu, Minami Kyushu, Okinawa

Furthermore, Metropolitan Tokyo, which is included in the southern part of the Kanto area (Minami Kanto) in every case, might be thought of as one region.

#### (3) Means of transition to a system of regions

- In principle, the transition to a system of regions should be carried out over the whole country at the same time. However, the report sees it as possible to effect the transition by moving forward on the basis of consultation between national government and the prefectures concerned.

#### (4) The administrative duties of regions

- The larger part of the duties currently carried out by existing prefectures should be transferred to municipalities, and regions should be mainly responsible for duties covering a wide area.
  - The duties currently carried out by central government ( in particular, the outreach offices of central government) should as far as possible be transferred to regions, with the exception of those duties which it is proper to think of as being carried out by central government.
  - Present a specific image of those duties that should be carried out by regions within a regional system. (Reference document 2)
- (5) Regional assembly
- Establish an assembly as the decision-making body of a region. The assembly members shall be directly elected by the residents of a region.
- (6) Executive organ of a region
- Establish a head of a region as its executive organ. The head shall be directly elected by the residents of a region. Multiple re-elections of a head shall be forbidden.
- (7) Adjustment of relations between the central government and regions
- The mechanism for intervention by central government in the affairs of a region should be fundamentally the same as at present, and a system analogous to the Agency Delegated Function System shall not be established
  - Establish a mechanism for adjusting relations between central government and regions.
- (8) The system concerning large cities
- When a regional system is introduced, in the case of large cities, it is appropriate to set up a mechanism which is suitable for the area of large city, to arrange special measures for the allocation of duties, and to establish a fiscal system that matches these.
  - With regard to Tokyo, as a capital city, it might be reasonable to explore special treatment corresponding to its special nature.
- (9) Dealing with the areas of prefectures
- Given the fact that the areas of prefectures have a long history and are deeply embedded in the consciousness of the Japanese people, it might be appropriate to think of assigning some special designation to these areas (or to areas which can be further differentiated because of some special historical association).
- (10) Fiscal arrangements under a regional system



- Given an expected increase in demand accompanying a transfer of duties from national government, the transfer of appropriate revenue sources should also be implemented.
- Aim to strengthen the local tax system, of which the core is a type of tax with a low level of maldistribution, and realize a local taxation system which is suited to a decentralized society.
- Investigate a system which is suitable for carrying out appropriate financial adjustment measures in response to tax revenue and financial demand.

### **3 – 4 Issues to be faced in connection with the introduction of a regional system**

In its final section, the report raises issues and problems that have to be faced in connection with the introduction of a regional system.

Firstly, the report says that the introduction of a regional system should not end with simply taking a fresh look at the prefectural system, but should involve a reconstruction of the patterns to be adopted by both central and local government, and the issues that are discussed in this connection must cover wide areas such as the future pattern of the national politico-administrative system, the future pattern of central and local administrative structures, and the development of administrative reform throughout the system from central through to local government.

Furthermore, the report points out that the abolition of prefectures and the establishment of a regional system, in addition to setting out the long-term direction of the future pattern of the land area of Japan, will have a major influence on the lives of the Japanese people.

It will be clear from the above that the thinking presented by the report is along the lines that judgments concerned with the introduction of a regional system should be carried out on the basis of the trends shown in a national discussion on the wide-ranging problems referred to above.

The report makes clear that the government is expected to take discussions forward, and to play an appropriate role in ensuring that the national debate is deepened, and that the people as a whole are expected to take this report as the basis for wide-ranging discussions.

### **3 – 5 Summary of the report**

As already pointed out, this report is aligned with the thinking set out in the “Report concerning the Future System of Local Government ” issued by the 27th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems, but this report is even more

specific. For example, the earlier report simply said that “the head of a region and the members of the regional assembly should be publicly elected”, but in the later report it is made very clear that both the head and the assembly members shall be elected directly by local residents, and a prohibition on repeated re-election of the head is included. In addition, there is a clear image of the area of a region and the duties to be carried out by a region.

The basic thinking of the report is comprised in the abolition of prefectures, which constitute the current wide-area local government bodies, and the establishment of regions as new, wide-area local government bodies. And these regions that are designated in the report are not simply expanded areas resulting from the merger of prefectures, but local public bodies that will take over many of the duties and powers of existing outreach bureaus and offices attached to central government ministries and agencies. And the proposed regions are to have a form that will enable them to carry out these duties on their own account as local autonomous bodies with a publicly elected head. It is fair to say therefore that this report is in line with the general trend of the recent debate over a regional system.

Furthermore, the report makes no mention whatever of a federal system. This is due to the fact that this system was already rejected in the Report of the 27th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems, which pointed out that a federal system would necessitate a revision of a fundamental part of the Constitution of Japan, and that a federal system requires as a precondition the existence of federal constituent units with a high degree of historical, cultural and social unity and independence, and that seen from the perspective of Japanese history and the current state of consciousness of the Japanese people, it was not appropriate to make the choice of a federal system an option in terms of system reform.

#### **4 Types and historical directions of regional systems**

In this chapter, I would like firstly to typify regional systems in theoretical terms, and then to examine in what kind of ways the debate of regional systems has changed over time in Japan, seen from the point of view of such theoretically extracted types.

##### **4 – 1 Types of regional systems**

If we look at regional systems from 2 points of view, namely the character of the region itself and the number of tiers in a local system, the following 8 types can be identified.

A: Regions as administrative organs of the state (central government)

- A – (a) Regions (administrative organs of the state) – municipalities (local autonomous bodies)
- A – (b) Regions (administrative organs of the state) – prefectures (local autonomous bodies) – municipalities (local autonomous bodies)
- B: Regions as intermediate bodies (administrative organs of the state + local autonomous bodies)
  - B – (a) Regions (administrative organs of the state + local autonomous bodies) – municipalities (local autonomous bodies)
  - B – (b) Regions (administrative organs of the state + local autonomous bodies) – prefectures (local autonomous bodies) – municipalities (local autonomous bodies)
- C: Regions as local autonomous bodies
  - C – (a) Regions (local autonomous bodies) – municipalities (local autonomous bodies)
  - C – (b) Regions (local autonomous bodies) – prefectures (local autonomous bodies) – municipalities (local autonomous bodies)
- D: Regions as constituent units of a federal state
  - D – (a) Regions (nation states) – municipalities (local autonomous bodies)
  - D – (b) Regions (nation states) – prefectures (local autonomous bodies) – municipalities (local autonomous bodies)

#### **4 – 2 Historical trends in the debate of regional systems**

Adopting a historical perspective, the image of regions found in the prewar commission of inquiry corresponded to category A, the region as an administrative organ of state. This changed to type B, the region as an intermediate body, in the Report of the 4th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems (“Local Regions” draft). And the type of region found in the Report of the 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems corresponds to type C, a region as a local autonomous body. These changes can be thought of as reflecting the dominant pattern of thinking about regional systems in the various periods concerned.

In terms of a broad current, what can be emphasized is the change from the prewar concept of a region as an administrative organ of the state (central government), type (A), to the postwar concept of a region as an intermediate body, type (B), and then to the present concept of the region, type (C), as a local autonomous body. Specifically, one can say that the debate over regional systems in Japan has moved in the direction of decentralization. But that said, movement

has not gone as far as type (D), where the region is seen as a constituent organ (nation) within a federal state system.

With regard to the number and the structure of tiers in a local government system, the regional system that can be identified in the prewar commission of inquiry was a system of 3 tiers, which envisaged the continued existence of prefectures, while both the 4th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems and the 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems envisaged a regional system of regions consisting of 2 tiers, in which prefectures were abolished.

Specifically, a transition in thinking has taken place, from the concept of a 3-tier system, leaving the prefectures in place and superimposing on them a system of regions, to the concept of a 2-tier system that envisaged the abolition of prefectures and the creation of regions. In the background to this transition, 2 factors can be identified, namely the increased emphasis on administrative efficiency in the postwar period and the continuing development of mergers between municipalities.

Thirdly, there is the question of the administrative authority of regions. In the prewar commission of inquiry, regions were seen as organs which carried out the general administrative work of the state (central government). Specifically, excluding some added duties, regions were seen as existing to carry out, from among the tasks carried out by hitherto existing prefectures as administrative organs of central government, tasks other than those transferred to prefectures as local autonomous bodies. Furthermore, quite apart from regions, individual outreach organs of central government existed in parallel to them.

In contrast to this, in the “Local Regions” plan put forward by the 4th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems, it was envisaged that comprehensive administrative bodies(intermediate bodies)would be set up which would also have the authority hitherto possessed by outreach organs of central government in each area. However, the report also proposed setting up at the same time “Local Area Offices”, which would be comprehensive outreach organs of central government, with the result that almost all the authority of existing national outreach organs would be transferred to these new offices, with the possibility that regions would have only one part of the authority hitherto possessed by prefectures.

This proposal was changed, in the Report of the 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems to a concept whereby regions would be comprehensive administrative bodies (local autonomous bodies) which would also take over the

administrative powers of central government local outreach organs. Moreover, no mention is made of setting up separately comprehensive local organs of central government in the form of the “Local Area Offices” referred to by the 4th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems.

With regard too to official authority held by regions under a regional system, the first historical change was one from a system under which a part of national (central government) duties was dealt with by general local administrative national organs (special outreach organs of the state also existed separately to handle individual administrative matters) to a postwar system, under which national government matters as well as those of local autonomous bodies are dealt with by comprehensive local administrative bodies (intermediate bodies), while at the same time, still separately, comprehensive local administrative organizations continued to exist. And then, change moved in the direction of decentralization, under which the duties of local government bodies, including national duties (as far as possible, national outreach organs were to be abolished) were handled by comprehensive local administrative bodies (local government bodies).

In ways such as these, when we look at events from a historical perspective, we can see how the concept of a regional system in Japan has changed from a centralized concept of regions to a decentralized or devolved concept. Furthermore, in terms of the number of tiers in a local system, there has been a change from a 3-tier theory to a 2-tier theory. It follows from this that in the future too, it is reasonable to assume that the system of regions that will continue to be deepened and developed further is that centered on that presented in the 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems as C – (a) Regions (local autonomous bodies) – municipalities (local autonomous bodies).

## **5 Major trends concerning a regional system since the Report of the 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems**

It is appropriate, at this point in this paper, to refer to the major trends or movements with regard to a system of regions that have taken place since the publication of the “Report concerning the Regional System”, issued by the 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems.

### **5 – 1 Formulation of the Law to Promote Special Regional Areas**

On December 13, 2006, the Law to Promote Special Regional Areas (formally: “The Law Concerning the Promotion of Wide-Area Administration in Special Regional Areas”) was enacted, and on January 26, 2007, it came into force.

In the event that a regional system is introduced, without requiring any form of

merger between prefectures, the land area of Hokkaido prefecture is to be considered as equivalent to the area of Hokkaido region.

Under this law, the pioneering model regional area (special regional area) was thus established in the land area of Hokkaido with the aim of carrying out on an experimental basis tasks transferred by central government.

This same law specifies 8 items of business hitherto carried out by central government in respect of which authority is to be transferred to Hokkaido, and a mechanism is also established for expanding the scope of authority transferred from central government in accordance with suggestions made by Hokkaido.

However, the above said, the matters in respect of which authority has been transferred are very circumscribed, so that at the present time, it is not possible to speak of a pioneering mechanism headed in the direction of a full-scale regional system. Close attention will be paid to the extent to which, from now on, the area of authority is expanded in respect of matters transferred by central government in response to suggestions from Hokkaido, but it is reasonable to presume that there are likely to be a large number of difficult matters to be faced.

## **5 – 2 Establishment of the Council for Creating a Vision for Regional Systems**

On January 26, 2007, the day on which the Law to Promote Special Regional Areas came into force, central government established a Council for Creating a Vision for Regional Systems. The Council was established with the objective of debating such basic matters concerned with a regional system as the shape of local society, and the shape of economic society after the introduction of a regional system is realized, the new face of government in terms of central government and local government relations under a regional system, and so on, and formulating the “Vision for Regional Systems”.

Composed of 15 members, the Council is expected to bring together a vision of regional systems within a period of 3 years. As the first step, it is to produce by March 2008 an interim report setting out points for debate concerning the concept and broad framework of regional systems.

In addition, at the same time as establishing the Council for Creating a Vision for Regional Systems, the government also established a Conference on Regional Systems. This body is composed of 11 economic leaders from each block throughout the country, and its role will be to stimulate debate among the people on a regional system.

## **5 – 3 The 2nd Interim Report from the Liberal Democratic Party Investigative Committee on Regional Systems**

The Liberal Democratic Party, the ruling party in the Japanese Government,

established in November 2004 an internal Investigative Committee on Regional Systems, which debated the introduction of regional systems and issued its first interim report in July 2005. The “2nd Interim Report on Regional Systems” by this Investigative Committee was issued on June 14, 2007, after the report by the 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems.

In terms of the basic thinking in this “2nd Interim Report”, there are many points in common with the Report of the 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems, such as the proposal to introduce a system of regions in place of the currently existing system of prefectures, or the proposal that the division of role between central government, the regions and the municipalities, forming the basic constituent units of local government, should be based on the principle of subsidiarity. However, it is not as specific as the Report of the 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems when it comes to questions of the land area of regions, the duties of regions, or the process of choosing the head of a region. In addition, a special characteristic of this report is that it puts forward a unique proposal concerning the fiscal system to be introduced in regions, and it includes a time schedule for the process leading to the transition to a regional system.

However, the above said, this LDP document is still an interim report, and there are many issues that have still to be investigated further. LDP will continue its investigations.

#### **5 – 4 “Basic Thinking concerning a Regional System” by the National Governors’ Association**

It goes without saying that if a system of regions were to be introduced, the greatest impact would be on existing prefectures. In August 2004, the National Governors’ Association (NGA), whose members comprise the governors of all Japanese prefectures, established a Research Committee on Regional Systems. In July 2005, this committee was restructured as the Special Committee on Regional Systems, and it continued to investigate and deliberate on various problems concerned with the pattern to be adopted by wide-area administrative bodies, including a regional system.

Following the deliberations of the Special Committee, The NGA issued on January 18, 2007, a document entitled “Basic Thinking concerning a Regional System”.

Issued by the NGA, the document expresses cautious views about moving forward on the premise of the introduction of a regional system, but judging that as concerned parties, the NGA must react positively to the introduction of a

regional system, the document clarifies the NGA's standpoint.

Specifically 7 basic principles are listed as preconditions for an examination of a regional system.

Many of these conditions are the same as those found in the Report of the 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems, with a central focus on replacing prefectures by regions as wide-area local autonomous bodies. However, the Report emphasizes the need for further progress in decentralization, such as the point that the introduction of regions must be accompanied by a fresh look at the structure of central government, including the breakup and reorganization of central government ministries and agencies. Furthermore, the report expresses a desire to see the establishment of a single deliberative body, including both the state (central government) and local government, to look at ways of taking forward an examination of the system of regions.

After this report was issued, the NGA set up 2 project teams under the leadership of the Special Committee on Regional Systems, to be responsible for a much more detailed investigation of several issues concerned with the basic design of a regional system.

## **6 Issues Surrounding the Introduction of a Regional System – More Time Needed for Debate and Deliberation**

Up to this point in this paper, we have looked at the debate on regional systems in Japan both in terms of historical developments and in terms of recent trends. At the present time, the debate can be seen as focusing on 2 major issues, firstly the replacement of prefectures by regions, and secondly, a 2-tier system of local government, comprising regions as wide-area local autonomous bodies, and municipalities as the basic units of local government.

It is a reasonable presumption that from now on too, these two same issues, namely regions as wide-area local autonomous bodies, and the 2-layer structure of local government consisting of regions and municipalities, will be further developed in debate.

However, once the debate moves into the area of specific issues concerning a regional system, it can be anticipated that very many issues will have to be examined, such as the land area to be encompassed within each region, the pattern that should be adopted for the division of roles and the apportionment of duties between regions, the state (central government), and municipalities, the way in which central government should intervene in the affairs of regions, the role of large cities under a regional system, the fiscal system to be adopted in



regions, etc, and there will no doubt be an equally diverse range of opinions concerning each of these topics.

And as reasons for introducing a regional system, one could cite the ongoing progress of decentralization, the realization of a local area imbued with vitality, and the construction of an efficient system of administration linking central and local government. Whether or not these aims can be achieved, will differ greatly according to the specific way in which a regional system is introduced.

Furthermore, with regard to the specific design of a regional system, it may be that some revision of the Constitution will be needed. For example, Clause 2 of Article 93 states that the chief executive officers of all local public entities shall be elected by direct popular vote, so if a system were introduced whereby the head of a region were to be elected indirectly by the regional assembly, that part of the Constitution would need to be amended.

At present, the level of public interest in a regional system is not particularly high. Moreover, there are many issues that have to be debated. It follows that as of now, we are at a stage where more time is needed for examination and debate of these issues, including the pros and cons of introducing a regional system.

### **(Notes)**

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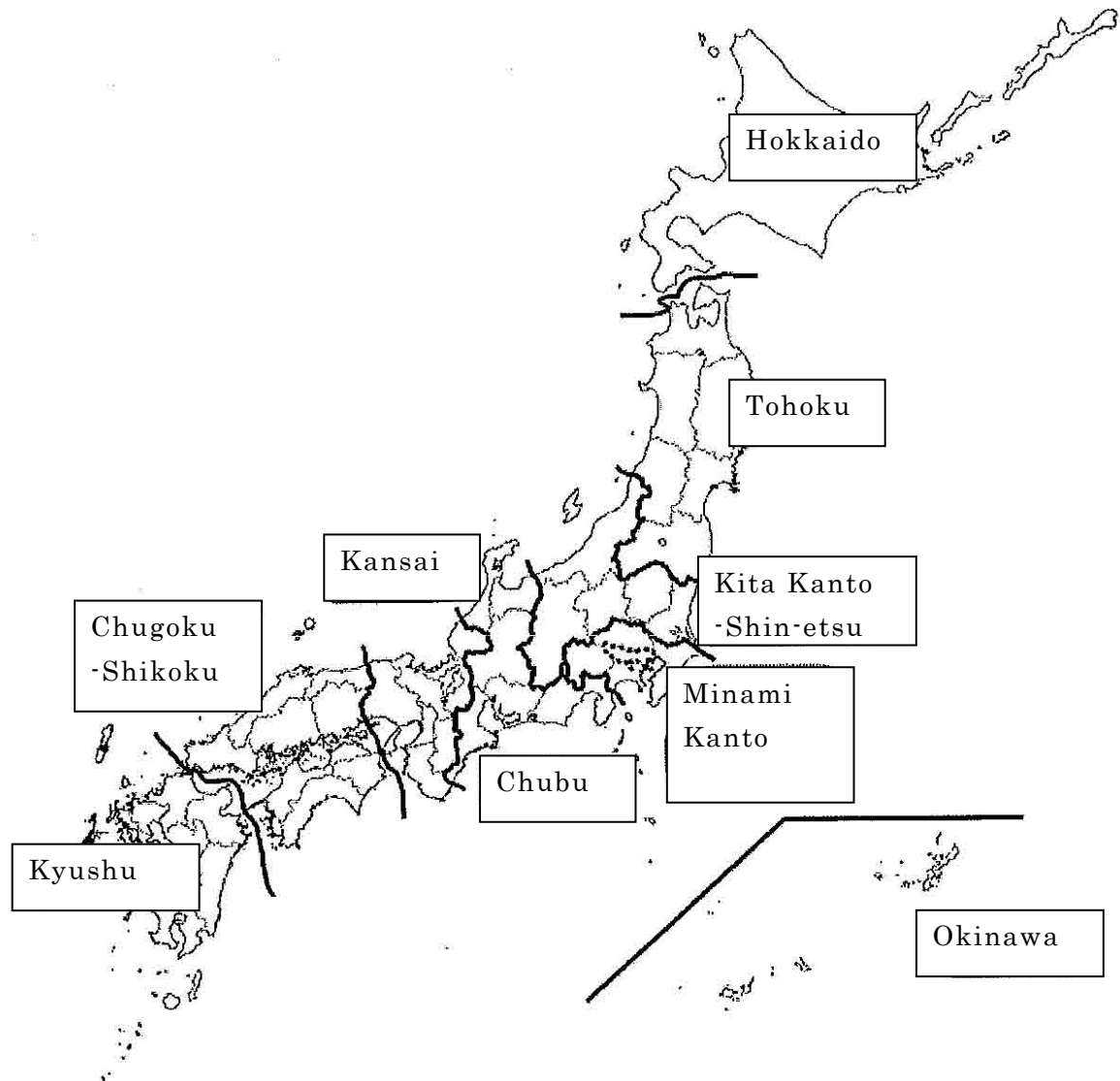
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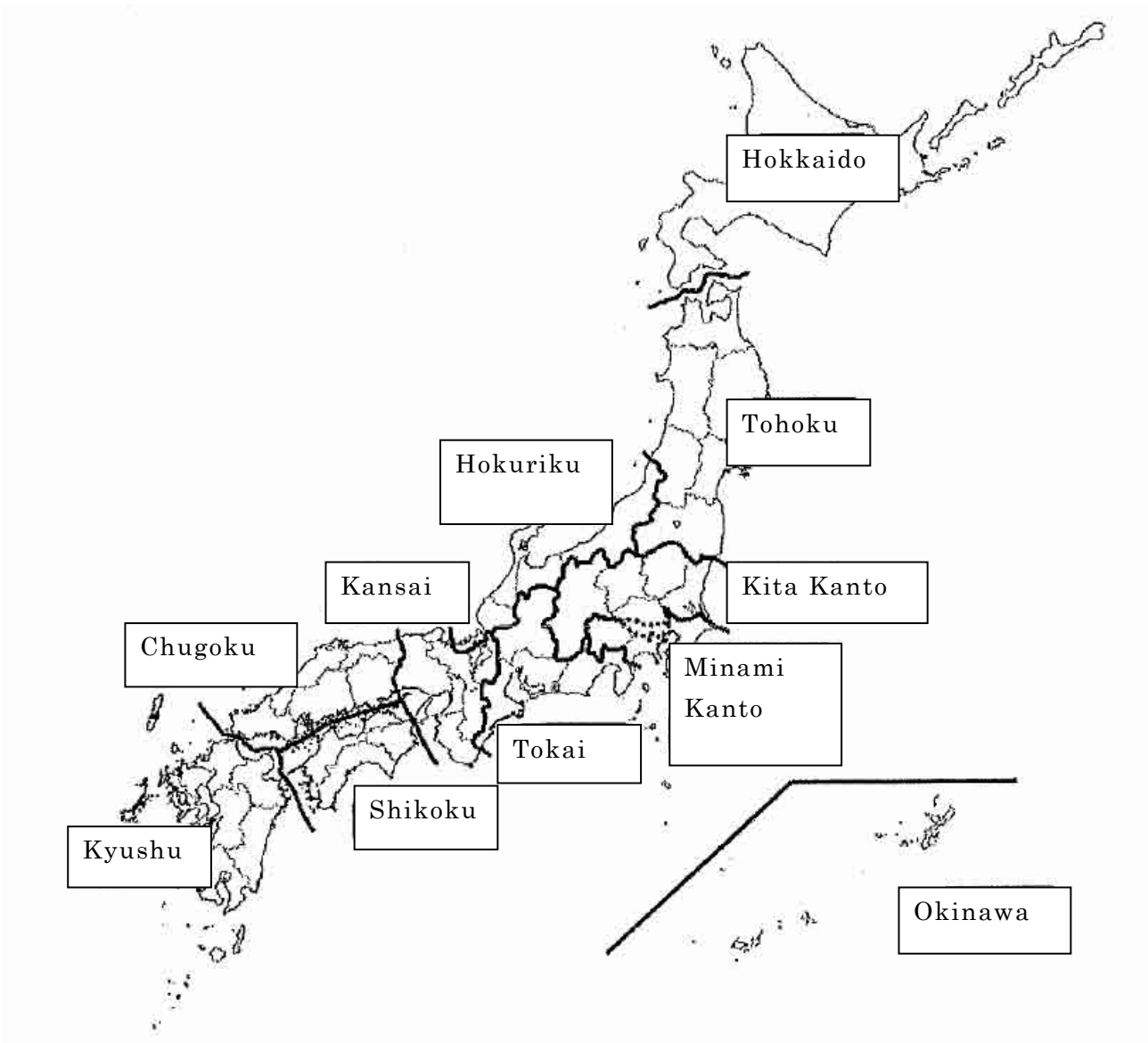
(Document 1)

**Area of Regions (Example 1: 9 Regions)**



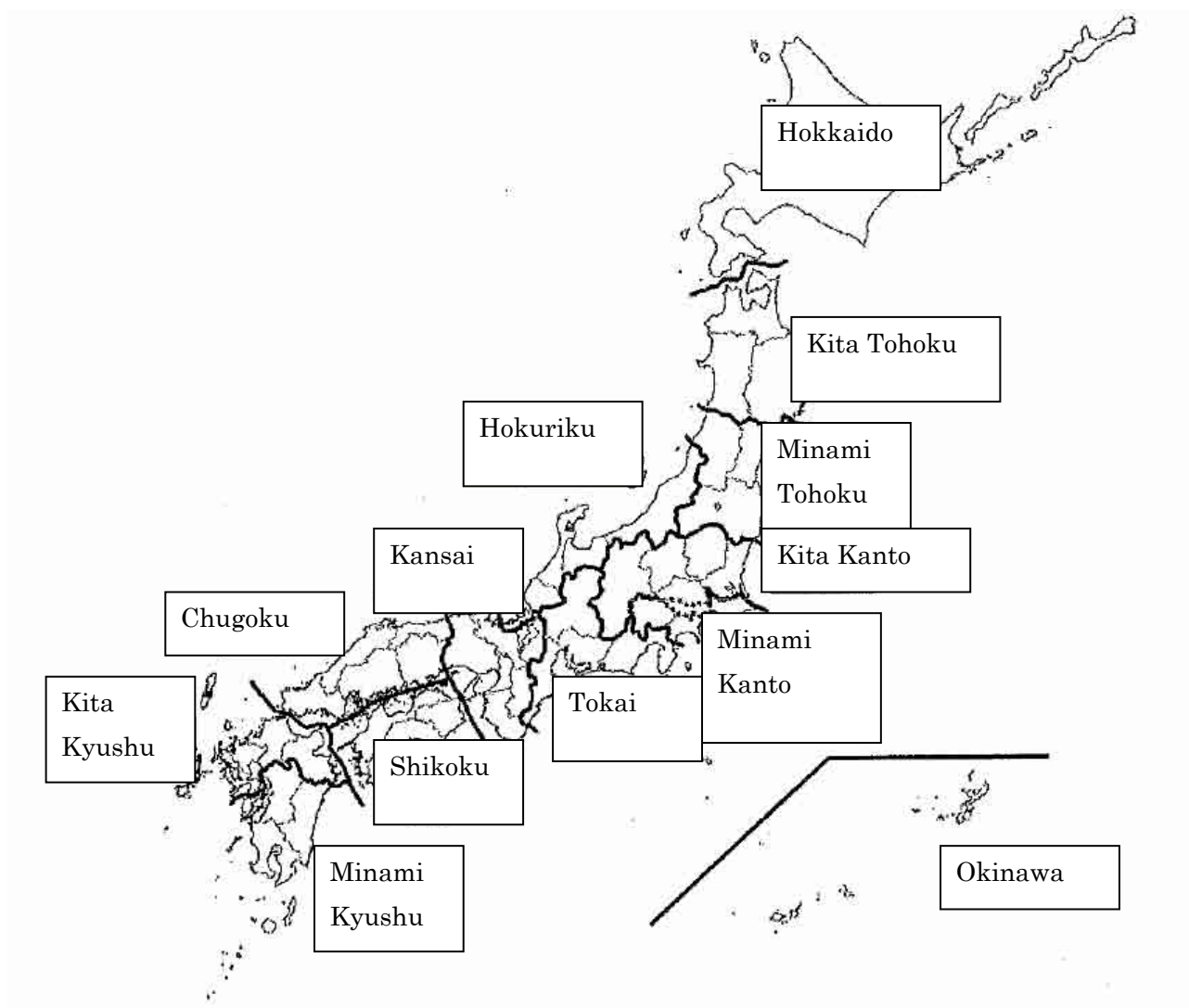
(Data from The 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems “Report concerning the Regional System”)

Area of Regions (Example 2: 11 Regions)



(Data from The 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems “Report concerning the Regional System”)

### Area of Regions (Example 3: 13 Regions)



(Data from The 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems “Report concerning the Regional System”)

(Document 2)

**A specific image of duties to be carried out by Regions in a regional system**

Administration Area	Duties by Regions
Infrastructure	Maintenance of National Roads* Maintenance of Local Roads (Wide-Area) Maintenance of First Class Rivers* Maintenance of Second Class Rivers (Wide-Area) Maintenance of Specified Important Ports Maintenance of Second Class Airports* Maintenance of Third Class Airports Maintenance of Facilities to Prevent Sand Encroachment* Designation of Forest Reserves*
Environment	Provision against Organic Chemicals* Provision against Air Pollution* Provision against Water Pollution* Provision against Industrial Waste Maintenance of National Parks Protection of Wild Animals Supervision of Hunting (Scarcity, Wide-Area)
Industry/Economy	Provision for Small & Medium Enterprises* Local Industry Policy * Tourism Development Policy * Agricultural Development Policy* Permission to use Farmland for another purpose* Permission to undertake Specified Fishery* Fishing Rights License
Traffic/Information	Transportation Business License* Automobile Registration & Testing* Travel Agency and Hotel Registration*
Employment/Labor	Employment Introduction Service* Vocational Education* Advice on Labor Problems*
Security/ Disaster Management	Regulation of Dangerous Objects* Provision against Large-Scale Disaster Making a Wide-Area Disaster Prevention Plan Order of Evacuation in Wartime

Social Welfare/Health	Designation of Nursing Care Businesses Provision of Facilities for Heavily Disabled Persons Advanced Medical Services Permission to Establishing a Medical Facility Provision against Infectious Diseases
Education/Culture	Permission to Establish a School Facility Permission to Establish a High School Preservation of Cultural Treasures
Coordination between Municipalities	Coordination between Municipalities

Notes: Duties with an asterisk are basically to be carried out by Regions, including authority newly transferred from Central Government.

(Data from The 28th Committee to Investigate Local Government Systems “Report concerning the Regional System”)