

Considering Modalities for Wide-Area Cooperation in the Future

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Introduction

The Great Heisei Consolidation that began in 1999 came to an end in March 2010. Over this period the number of municipalities (which include cities, towns, and villages) decreased significantly from 3,232 to 1,727, with 457 municipalities with populations of 10,000 people or less still in existence. As can be seen from this, it would be hard to make the claim that a structure had been set in place in which the municipalities were each capable of performing municipal administration independently on their own in an effective and efficient manner. Cooperation between municipalities is considered to be essential in administrative management, even after having gone through the Great Heisei Consolidation.

But their image is not necessarily the same as it had been before. On the contrary, there have been changes to the municipal structure due to the mergers of municipalities, and hereafter there will be changes to local communities from the further aging of society and falling population. On the basis of such factors, each region must seek out new approaches for cooperation between municipalities.

The phrase “wide-area administration” was conventionally used to refer to cooperation between municipalities. But recently the phrase “wide-area cooperation” has been used frequently. Whereas wide-area administration focuses on administrative activities (the provision of administrative services) carried out across municipal bounds, wide-area cooperation focuses on modalities for the cooperative relations by which these wide-area administrative activities are carried out.

In thinking about future cooperation between municipalities, this shows that it is not good enough to merely implement wide-area administrative activities. Rather, this hints at the importance of reconsidering and newly selecting cooperation techniques that are designed to implement such administrative activities in an effective and efficient manner in accordance with the actual conditions in each region.

Based on the history of the development of techniques for wide-area cooperation (legal institutions and area administration) and the changing environment surrounding such cooperation in recent years, this paper will attempt to consider future modalities for this wide-area cooperation.

1. The Development of Legal Institutions for Wide-Area Cooperation

Let's start by taking a look at the history of the development of legal institutions for wide-area cooperation.

(1) Pre-War Institutions

Japan's contemporary local government system could be said to have begun from the enactment of the Town and Village System Act in 1888, but an association system had already

been created through this law. That is to say that Article 116, Section 1 of the Town and Village System Act stipulated that: “Town and village associations may be established by obtaining the permission of the regulatory authorities via consultation for the sake of jointly handling the affairs of said towns and villages.”

These associations were an institution that was only permitted in towns and villages. In “Rationales for the City System Act and the Town and Village System Act,” which stated the law’s intent, it was written that, “In cases where total mergers cannot be completed due to circumstances beyond anyone’s control, or cases where it would be unwieldy to merge them, then there shall be a method for establishing town and village associations as found in Article 116 of the Town and Village System Act.” As can be understood from this, the association system was considered to be a method (expedient) taken in place of consolidation for those towns and villages that could not be merged in the Great Meiji Consolidation, which was being promoted following the enactment of the Town and Village System Act.

With regard to this mechanism, in the rationales for these laws it states, “The associations in the towns and villages shall retain their independence, and thereby handle certain administrative affairs jointly. The extent of these joint administrative affairs shall be respectively determined in accordance with the actual needs.”

Through the revisions to the City System Act and the Town and Village System Act in 1911, the institution of partial administrative associations among the associations was expanded to and applied in the cities. Which is to say, Article 149 of the City System Act from after the revisions stipulated that, “In cases where municipalities handle some of their administrative tasks jointly, they may set up a municipal association with the permission of the prefectural governor through consultations.” What is more, it stipulated that towns and villages could create two types of associations: partial administrative associations and total administrative associations. Article 129, Section 1 of the Town and Village System Act stipulates that, “In cases where towns and villages handle some of their administrative tasks jointly, they may set up a town or village association with the permission of the prefectural governor through consultations.” Along with this, Article 129, Section 2 stipulates that, “In cases where there is a special need, towns and villages may set up a town or village association in order to jointly handle all of their administrative tasks with the permission of the prefectural governor through consultations.”

The association system that had been created as an expedient for towns and villages that could not merge was also expanded and applied to cities, whereby it came to develop more and more as a mechanism for jointly handling the administrative affairs of the municipalities.

(2) Post-War Expansion of the Institutions

Due to the Local Autonomy Act that was enacted in 1947, the applicable scope of the system for partial administrative associations was further enlarged to include the prefectures as well. Moreover, a town hall administrative association system was created for the towns and villages.

Three new types of institutions that differed from the associations were established via the revisions to this law in 1952. Namely, these are councils, the joint establishment of agencies, and the outsourcing of administrative affairs. These were adopted in the interest of curtailing expenditures and efficiently handling administrative tasks.

The 1956 revisions to the Local Autonomy Law institutionalized dispatches of personnel members. The intent behind this was the same as for the above; to strive to increase the

efficiency of and streamline the handling of administrative tasks by actively encouraging the dispatch of personnel.

Local development corporations were created through the 1963 revisions to the Local Autonomy Act. These were designated as special local public bodies similar to the associations. They were introduced in order to jointly carry out the construction work that lays the foundation for local development together with the local municipalities against the backdrop of an age of local development that included the construction of new industrial cities.

Through the 1974 revisions to the Local Autonomy Act a system of combined partial administrative associations was created. This was done as a response to the rising need for wide-area administration in the municipalities that accompanied the expansion of the domain of daily life, and came from a desire to create a mechanism that aimed to promote the efficiency of this wide-area administration. The system was only permitted within the municipalities, and with these combined partial administrative associations it was not considered necessary to share the administrative tasks that were handled jointly with the associations throughout every structured municipality. The introduction of this system also made it possible to consolidate the associations.

Under the 1994 revisions to the Local Autonomy Act a system of wide-area cooperatives was created as a type of association. These could be described as an upgraded version of the partial administrative associations. Their major characteristics were that the national and prefectural governments could transfer administrative tasks directly to them, were acknowledged as having direct right of claim towards residents, were mandated to formulate wide-area plans, and so on.

As this indicates, the post-war development of legal institutions for the sake of wide-area cooperation proceeded mainly in the direction of expanding the association system from the pre-war era (expansion of the use of partial administrative associations to prefectures, the creation of a town hall administrative association system for towns and villages, and the creation of both combined partial administrative associations as well as a wide-area cooperative system). At the same time, it can be seen how simpler and more convenient institutions were created and new techniques were developed for the sake of regional development in response to the demands of the age.

(3) Other Means of Wide-Area Cooperation

In addition to those mentioned above, councils (virtual councils) and the dispatch of personnel members were also permitted that are not provided for in the Local Autonomy Act. In addition, there is also the technique of agreements, such as the mutual assistance agreements for firefighting (Article 39, Section 2 of the Fire Organization Act).

2. Development of Regional Administration (Wide-Area Administration Regions)

One method for wide-area cooperation that is important together with legal institutions is that of regional administration.

(1) Regional Administration Based on Outlines by the National Government

“Regional administration” treats spaces covering a certain breadth that exceeds municipal districts as a single region and seeks to carry out comprehensive and systematic improvements in these regions.

Regional administration via “wide-area administrative regions” has been developed in Japan since 1969 based on guidelines by the national government. That is to say, regional administration has been carried out by establishing wide-area municipal regions based on the Guidelines for Promoting and Improving Wide-Area Municipal Regions in local regions, and by establishing wide-area administrative regions for the peripheral regions surrounding major urban areas based on the Guidelines for Promoting and Improving the Peripheral Regions Surrounding Major Urban Areas in major metropolitan regions. As such, the combination of both wide-area municipal regions and wide-area administrative regions for the peripheral regions surrounding major urban areas were known by the collective term of wide-area administrative regions.

These wide-area administrative regions were conceived in order to respond to the motorization that began in the latter half of the 1960s and the expansion of the domain of daily life that accompanied this. One of the objectives for this was to set in place a wide-area system for jointly handling administrative work that exceeded the bounds of single municipal districts. Another objective was to aim to achieve the same effects as merging the structured municipalities together while actually leaving them as they were (“functional” municipal mergers). This was because it was difficult to merge the municipalities seeing as how it was still in the early days after the Great Showa Consolidation.

(2) Basic Mechanism for the Wide-Area Administrative Regions

The basic mechanism for the wide-area administrative regions is as follows.

First, the wide-area administrative regions were set. Wide-area municipal regions were set by designating the domain for daily life comprised of core cities and their peripheral municipalities as districts, with the standard for these being a population of roughly 10,000 people or more. These were set by the prefectural governors, and as a general rule all of the municipalities were allocated so that they belonged to one wide-area municipal region or another. Wide-area administrative regions for the peripheral regions surrounding major urban areas were likewise set by the prefectural governors, with a population size of about 400,000 people used as their standard. As a result, almost every part of Japan came to be covered by wide-area administrative regions, except for the central areas in major metropolitan regions.

Next came the establishment of wide-area administrative bodies. It was decided that councils and partial administrative associations would be established for wide-area municipal regions and councils would be established for wide-area administrative regions for the peripheral regions surrounding major urban areas to serve as organizations that promote the advancement and improvement of the wide-area administrative regions (wide-area administrative bodies). Later on, following after the institutionalization of combined partial administrative associations and wide-area cooperatives, partial administrative associations were deemed preferable to councils, combined partial administrative associations were deemed preferable to partial administrative associations, and preference was also given to wide-area cooperatives. This aimed to further strengthen the wide-area administrative bodies, integrate other partial administrative associations and the like into wide-area administrative bodies, and comprehensively implement wide-area undertakings through wide-area administrative bodies.

Lastly came the enactment of wide-area administrative region plans. The decision was made to have the wide-area administrative bodies enact wide-area administration plans (wide-area municipal region plans and advancement and improvement plans for the peripheral regions surrounding major urban areas) in order to promote comprehensive and rational advancement

and improvement schemes in the wide-area administrative regions. The expectation was that having the wide-area administrative bodies themselves or their structured municipalities implement wide-area undertakings on the basis of these plans would offer comprehensive and unified advancement and development for the regions.

(3) History of the Development of the Wide-Area Administrative Regions

The history of the development of the wide-area administrative regions can be divided up into four periods.

To start with, the first phase (1969 - 1978) was the period in which wide-area administrative regions were started based on the concept of wide-area living regions from the New National Comprehensive Development Plan. Wide-area administrative regions were set up, wide-area administrative bodies were established, and wide-area administrative region plans were formulated all around the country. Improvements to the road network and the formation of wide-area systems for jointly handling tasks (garbage, human waste, firefighting, etc.) were promoted based upon these plans.

During the second phase (1979 - 1988), new wide-area administrative region plans were formulated based on the concept of settlements found in the Third National Comprehensive Development Plan. As such, the setting in place of regions with the goal of establishing the comprehensive living environments called for by the concept of settlements was promoted underneath this new plan. The construction of regional plazas to serve as hub facilities for the regions also came during this period.

For the third phase (1989 - 1999), the third plan was formulated based on the concept of “the formation of a multi-polar, decentralized pattern of land use” found in the Fourth National Comprehensive Development Plan. As such, the setting in place of regions with the goal of establishing living spaces where people could intrinsically experience affluence were promoted based upon this third plan. The “hometown municipal region” policy that was capable of establishing funds to act as independent sources of financing for the wide-area administrative bodies was also initiated in this period.

In the fourth phase (2000 - 2009) the fourth plan was formulated based on the “creation of nature-rich residential areas” found in the Grand Design for the 21st Century (Fifth National Comprehensive Development Plan), and the setting in place of such regions was promoted based on this plan. However, the Great Heisei Consolidation was moving forward in this period, and so dealing with municipal mergers was given priority over setting in place wide-area administrative regions.

In attempting to give the above recap of the wide-area administrative region type of wide-area administration that has been developing over 40 years, one could start by making the case that it was enormously effective when it came to improving the road networks in the regions and forming the wide-area systems for jointly handling tasks that were conditional upon the roads. But in terms of the other objective of “functional” municipal mergers, it would have to be said that ultimately it failed to achieve this. Various different attempts were made to strengthen the wide-area administrative bodies, but there were limitations with said bodies in their capacity as the core constituents for systematically and comprehensively managing the regions.

3. Changes in the Environment concerning Wide-Area Cooperation

As has been indicated thus far, municipal wide-area cooperation has been promoted in Japan based primarily around the wide-area administrative region form of wide-area administration

by utilizing the legal institutions from the Local Autonomy Act. However, three major changes have arisen recently in the environment surrounding this wide-area cooperation.

(1) Progress with the Great Heisei Consolidation

First off, there has been the progress with the Great Heisei Consolidation. As was mentioned in the introduction, the number of municipalities dropped drastically from 3,232 in 1999 to 1,727 in 2010 due to the Great Heisei Consolidation. As this was going on, wide-area municipalities (in which all of the municipalities belonging to a wide-area administrative region were merged into a single municipality) began appearing in large numbers. In the past only the city of Iwaki was treated as a wide-area municipality, but as a result of this round of mergers 37 wide-area municipalities were newly created (as of July 2008). There was no longer any need for regional administration in the form of wide-area administrative regions in these wide-area municipalities, and as a matter of course the wide-area administrative bodies were dissolved as well. Furthermore, while structured municipalities did not reach the level of wide-area municipalities, their numbers increased substantially from 5 to 59 for those with two regions, and from 11 to 61 for those with three regions (as of July 2008). For the wide-area administrative regions it was envisioned that a certain large number of municipalities would exist within the regions, and that these would carry out wide-area administration by creating wide-area administrative bodies. But because of the Great Heisei Consolidation roughly half of these came to consist of regions that did not accord with this original image.

(2) Reversal in the National Government's Regional Administration Policy

Next there came a reversal in the national government's regional administration policy. In light of the progress with the municipal mergers mentioned above, the national government (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications) rescinded all of the previous guidelines related to wide-area administrative regions by a notice on December 26, 2008, and submitted the Guidelines on Promoting the Concept of Autonomous Settlement Regions in conjunction with this. The national government declared its intent to promote the new concept of "autonomous settlement regions" rather than the conventional wide-area administrative regions in the future, thereby making a major reversal in its policy towards wide-area administration.

The characteristics of these autonomous settlement regions are listed below.

- (A) The setting of the regions is left up to the initiative of each municipality. The autonomous settlement regions are formed when a core city and a peripheral municipality conclude an agreement on a one-on-one basis. Moreover, the requirements for a core city stipulate that it must have a population of at least 40,000 people and a population ratio between the daytime and evening of one or greater. Originally it was not assumed that they would be set up in areas all around the country.
- (B) No organizations like that of the wide-area administrative bodies will be newly created. Emphasis was placed on the leadership of the core cities, and after a core city has proclaimed itself as such it formulates a vision for coexisting with the autonomous settlement regions.
- (C) When it comes to carrying out work based on the agreements, it is assumed that more convenient methods (outsourcing work, jointly establishing agencies, etc.) will be used.

Yet on the other hand, the national government was unconcerned with whether or not each area maintained the wide-area administrative region framework. Each area was forced to consider whether to continue with the conventional wide-area administrative regions or to work on the new autonomous settlement regions as their method of wide-area administration for wide-area cooperation.

(3) Introducing and Enhancing Legal Institutions for Wide-Area Cooperation

Lastly, there are the introduction and enhancement of legal institutions for wide-area cooperation. The national government (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications) prepared a reform bill for the Local Autonomy Act in order to expand the degree of freedom of the local municipalities, and submitted this to the Diet on March 29, 2010.

With respect to the legal institutions for wide-area cooperation, this reform bill abolished the total administrative associations, town hall administrative associations, and local development corporations, the use of which had achieved almost nothing, and worked to enhance the system for jointly establishing agencies. In other words, this made it possible for the local municipalities to jointly establish administrative agencies and similar bodies (parliamentary secretariats, administrative agencies, mayoral internal organizations, and secretariats for committees and committee members, etc.) in addition to the committees, committee members, and supporting staff for such work that had previously been approved.

Unfortunately, this reform bill has yet to be enacted. However, if this reform bill were to be enacted it would add in new, simpler methods for wide-area cooperation, which would engender the need to consider using these new methods in each local municipality.

4. Modalities for Wide-Area Cooperation in the Future

Based on what has been discussed thus far, this paper will now consider modalities for wide-area cooperation in the future.

(1) Fundamental Trend: Towards an Era of Diverse Choices

On June 16, 2009 the 29th Local Government System Research Council released its Report on the Modality of the Basic Local Governments and Their Audit and Legislature Systems in the Future. This report put a stop to the national government's policy of promoting municipal mergers in the form of the Great Heisei Consolidation. At the same time, with respect to modalities for how the municipalities should handle their work in the future it said, "A diverse array of options has been offered, including strengthening administrative and fiscal foundations through municipal mergers, wide-area cooperation in peripheral municipalities through a method of handling tasks jointly, and supplementation by the prefectures. As such, each municipality should be allowed to choose for itself which of these mechanisms are the most suitable." In actuality, this signaled the arrival of an age when each municipality and region could choose modalities for wide-area cooperation that were suited to their own respective regional circumstances.

(2) Three Major Options

In thinking about wide-area cooperation, to start with there are three major options: horizontal wide-area cooperation, municipal mergers, and vertical wide-area cooperation.

The first option is horizontal wide-area cooperation. This is where similar municipalities go about performing wide-area administration activities by creating cooperative relationships

among themselves. This constituted the core of wide-area cooperation prior to the Great Heisei Consolidation, as epitomized by the wide-area administrative regions.

The second option is municipal mergers. Mergers have been referred to as “extreme wide-area administration,” as the claim could be made that mergers have pushed wide-area cooperation to extremes. This is not to imply that the Act on Special Cases of Municipal Mergers has been repealed. Rather, through the revisions to this law in March 2010 this stance has changed from forward progress to one of neutrality, on top of which it has been extended for an additional ten years. Special measures also remain in place, such as the merger exchange calculations.

The third option is vertical wide-area cooperation. This refers to having the prefecture complement the municipalities in areas that they cannot handle alone. With regard to the so-called “special municipalities,” which are small municipalities that have had their obligations to perform certain tasks partially rescinded, the question of whether these should be institutionalized or not has been put off as a matter for future consideration.

Since there are three options as indicated here, hereafter municipalities that choose mergers as a form of extreme wide-area cooperation will likely emerge, as will municipalities that engage in vertical wide-area cooperation such as by outsourcing tasks to their prefecture. But horizontal wide-area cooperation will undoubtedly come to constitute the primary method for this in the future, just as it was prior to the Great Heisei Consolidation. With that being the case, the issue is now about modalities for this horizontal wide-area cooperation.

(3) Modalities for Horizontal Wide-Area Cooperation

When thinking about modalities for horizontal wide-area cooperation, it is essential to consider this from the two dimensions of the targeted administrative tasks and the structures for handling these.

To begin with, the administrative tasks targeted by wide-area cooperation can be broadly divided into three types of tasks.

The first is the formulation of wide-area plans. This refers to formulating plans related to issues like setting in place general facilities, providing services, and regional promotion targeting the region as a whole above and beyond the bounds of single municipalities.

The second is planning and implementing wide-area projects. This refers to planning and implementing regional promotion policies and regional development projects that will have an impact on the region as a whole above and beyond the bounds of single municipalities.

The third is jointly handling routine administrative tasks. This refers to providing routine administrative services such as firefighting, garbage disposal, and nursing care insurance to the region as a whole above and beyond the bounds of single municipalities or to some of these regions in the interest of ensuring economies of scale and expertise.

Next are the structures for handling such tasks in wide-area cooperation, which can also be broadly divided into three methods.

The first method is to create separate groups that have corporate status for wide-area cooperation. This can be thought of as partial administrative associations, combined partial administrative associations, and wide-area cooperatives.

The second method is to create collaborative organizations and agencies for wide-area cooperation. This can be thought of as the establishment of councils and the joint establishment of agencies and the like.

The third method is to not create any special groups or organizations for wide-area cooperation. This can be thought of as outsourcing administrative tasks and agreements.

When engaging in wide-area cooperation solely by jointly handling routine administrative tasks, the scale of the organizations implementing such tasks may grow larger, but the authority for design and planning divisions will be retained by each municipality. This means they will jointly handle administrative tasks but not carry out regional administration. Conversely, when wide-area cooperation is performed solely by formulating wide-area plans, this will entail carrying out regional administration, but the scale of organizations that do not have implementing agencies will be small. Municipalities that take the lead in implementation when it comes to the formulation of wide-area plans will come to have a greater say, and so they cannot have significant authority when it comes to developing regional administration. As a consequence, if they strive to develop regional administration with a certain degree of forcefulness, then the organizations that are responsible for formulating wide-area plans will also have to bear the responsibility for planning and implementing wide-area projects. In cases where these organizations are responsible for jointly handling routine administrative tasks, then it will be possible for said organizations to forcefully develop regional administration rather than further expand their scale.

For the organizations responsible for this wide-area cooperation, if these are separate groups that have corporate status, such as with partial administrative associations, then said groups will be responsible for leadership when wide-area cooperation is carried out. On the other hand, in cases where this is handled by means such as outsourcing administrative tasks to core cities without creating any special organizations, for example, then the core city becomes the organization responsible for wide-area cooperation and bears responsibility for leadership in regional administration. In addition, when using the method of creating joint organizations and agencies, it is forecasted that the leadership of the municipalities in which such organizations and agencies are located will grow stronger.

As this indicates, the selection of the targeted administrative tasks and the structures for handling these are deeply intertwined with the issues of just how forcefully should regional administration be carried out and where should responsibility lie when carrying out such administration.

With conventional wide-area administrative regions only the formulation of wide-area plans, or the joint handling of routine administrative tasks in addition to this, had been carried out and they were unable to serve as the main constituents for the planning and implementing of wide-area projects, except for certain undertakings such as the construction of regional plazas. Because of this, the structures for handling these tasks tended to move away from councils to being enhanced into partial administrative associations and regional cooperatives. However, they were unable to make a significant contribution in terms of regional administration.

(4) What Will Become of Wide-Area Administrative Regions?

Wide-area administrative regions have been set up all around the country, and so in considering the future of wide-area cooperation this paper will begin by taking the question of what will become of these regions as its starting line. There are absolutely no problems with the wide-area municipalities in which wide-area administration itself is carried out by single municipalities. The wide-area administrative bodies were abolished, and so wide-area

administration came to be carried out just as the administration of said wide-area municipalities. The problems lie with the other wide-area administrative regions. The question of how to respond to the Great Heisei Consolidation and the reversal in the national government's wide-area administration policy that accompanied this poses a pressing challenge.

According to a questionnaire on this issue by this study group, when you look at the 207 wide-area administrative organizations of the 300 such organizations that existed as of April 2008 (excluding areas that counted as wide-area municipalities) that responded, you see that 42 of these organizations had already been abolished as of April 2010 (20.3%).

Looking at the number of structured municipalities from when these wide-area administrative organizations were abolished reveals that two to three such organizations were abolished in 14 of the municipalities (33.3%), making this the most prevalent response. Cases in which these organizations tend to be abolished more when there is a smaller number of structured municipalities have been on the rise, with this number being ten or higher in six municipalities (14.3%). Most of the administrative tasks handled only included regional development plans (wide-area administrative region plans), with their organizational configurations mostly accounted for by councils (35, 83.3%). Moreover, when it came to the reasons these were abolished, most of the respondents (33, 78.6%) said that the reason was because of the repeal of the national government's wide-area administrative region policy, followed by those who claimed that the reason was to decrease the number of structured municipalities (7, 16.7%).

Looking at this reveals that areas where wide-area administrative bodies (councils) only formulated wide-area plans were abolished on account of the policy reversal by the national government. To put this another way, areas where wide-area administrative bodies (partial administrative associations, etc.) jointly handled routine administrative tasks have largely persisted.

Yet it is not necessarily the case that the formulation of wide-area plans will continue among the wide-area administrative bodies that have persisted. If things continue as they are now, then there is a chance that the wide-area administrative bodies that had only formulated wide-area plans through the organizational configuration of councils will disappear. There is also the possibility that places where routine administrative tasks had been jointly handled through partial administrative associations and similar organizational configurations will transform into wide-area administrative bodies that only handle such routine tasks jointly. Wide-area administration in the form of wide-area administrative regions will most likely gradually decline.

Yet conversely, not much progress has been made with the new type of regional administration of autonomous settlement regions. There were 49 of these autonomous settlement regions as of February 3, 2011. However, these include 15 single cities/regions that have merged (wide-area municipalities), and so if these are excluded then only about 34 have been set up thus far.

(5) Outlook for the Future

The environment surrounding municipalities brought about by the Great Heisei Consolidation has not changed whatsoever. Efforts are being made to further promote local decentralization reform under the new slogan of "regional sovereignty reform." The aging of society coupled with falling birthrates and a declining population are proceeding unabated, with the fiscal circumstances among the national and local governments growing increasingly severe.

Now that the promotion of municipal mergers has come to an end, a configuration of “basic municipalities” that is based on the widened domain of daily life is required through a technique of strengthening horizontal wide-area cooperation.

That is to say, the enhancement of regional administration is required in the aim of boosting the efficiency of routine administrative tasks in the regions on the one hand (transition from handling these independently to handling them jointly and, in cases where this is already done jointly, to consider ways of doing this more efficiently), as well as to aim for comprehensive and systematic improvements across entire regions on the other hand.

It has now been five years since the period when the municipal mergers hit their peak, and urban development for new municipalities has settled down as well. As such, the time has now come for each municipality and region to once again consider modalities for wide-area cooperation, particularly modalities for new regional administration (organizations responsible for setting regions, regional planning, and regional administration and the tasks they are in charge of, etc.).

What is more, it is also believed that the national government will have to take up additional considerations regarding new modalities for regional administration, including enhancing the concept of autonomous settlement regions.

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