

Institutional Reform Tasks for Achieving Balanced Growth of Five Poles and Three Special Regions



Choi Hwan-yong
Senior Research Fellow, Innovation Legislation Division,
Korea Legislation Research Institute



The '5-Poles 3-Special Regions Balanced Growth Strategy,' one of the national agenda items of the People's Sovereignty Government, is a crucial policy to address the national crises of demographic change and regional depopulation. To realize this strategy, it requires not only the central government's commitment but also super-regional cooperation among local governments, along with institutional support to ensure policy consistency.

The term 'balance' appears five times in our Constitution. Excluding the supply-demand balance for agricultural and fishery products in Article 123, Article 119, Paragraph 2 mandates balanced growth of the national economy; Article 120, Paragraph 2 requires balanced development and utilization of the national territory and resources; Article 122 mandates the efficient, balanced use, development, and conservation of the national territory, and Article 123 stipulates the duty to foster regional economies for balanced development among regions. The Constitution emphasizes balance to guard against the inefficiency caused by congestion costs from concentration and regional imbalances.

From a perspective that views the essence of democracy as ensuring diverse opportunities, the current concentration in the capital region and the stagnation of regional economies should be seen as a crisis not merely due to population concentration but also from the standpoint of a decline in the nation's overall competitiveness. Overcoming this requires a strong commitment from the central government to promote balanced development and super-regional cooperation among local governments. It can be understood that the new government intends to pursue this as a national agenda item called the '5-Poles 3-Special Balanced Growth Strategy'.



Why '5 Poles and 3 Special Regions'?

The '5 Poles' refer to the Seoul metropolitan area, the Chungcheong region, the Gwangju-Jeonnang region, the Daegu-Gyeongbuk region, and the Busan-Ulsan-Gyeongnam region. The '3 Specials' denote the special autonomous regions of Gangwon, Jeonbuk, and Jeju. This includes the Seoul metropolitan area, which was omitted from the previous administration's '4+3 Super-Regional Specialized Development' plan. This is a welcome change, representing a paradigm shift from merely countering the Seoul metropolitan area to pursuing mutual growth with it. The reason is that balanced development is a national imperative, and regional growth must be pursued alongside the development of the metropolitan area. However, it is widely recognized that bolder national policies must be pursued to halt the acceleration of imbalances caused by regions collectively bearing the congestion costs of population concentration, and to build a future for Korea where prosperity is shared everywhere.



Need for Institutional Framework Improvement to Form Five Poles

To secure regional competitiveness, a certain scale must be ensured to guarantee diverse opportunities. This requires forming super-regional areas larger than the current metropolitan local governments. Institutionally, the formation of special local governments is the framework for building a super-regional cooperation system that transcends the jurisdictions of metropolitan governments. The problem is that the Local Autonomy Act, which governs the formation of special local governments, provides only a somewhat loose framework for cooperation. Under the current system, the institutional framework for establishing special local governments is defined by 'conventions'. These conventions merely establish 'formal' principles regarding the organizational structure of the executive and legislative bodies, the allocation of expenses, and similar matters, while remaining silent on the 'substantive' location of authority and responsibility. For example, Japan's Osaka Metropolitan Federation requires the heads of constituent local governments to share responsibilities by function and establishes cooperative systems with basic local governments, a point worthy of attention.



Institutional Improvement Directions for Securing the Self-Sustaining Capacity of the Three Major Special Autonomous Regions

The three major special autonomous regions, while differing in degree, are guaranteed special provisions for industrial development reflecting regional characteristics. Jeju Special Self-Governing Province is establishing a development strategy as an international free city, Gangwon Special Self-Governing Province as a future industry global city, and Jeonbuk Special Self-Governing Province as a global life economy city. Jeju Special Self-Governing Province operates as a single metropolitan-level local government without basic local governments, while Gangwon and Jeonbuk Special Self-Governing Provinces were launched as two-tier systems with basic local governments. This institutional inconsistency must be resolved to establish a unified institutional structure. In this case, it is necessary to establish distribution criteria for affairs suitable for special self-governing provinces, premised on a cooperative system between special self-governing provinces and basic local governments. This is because the roles and responsibilities among basic local governments need to be redistributed to align with the development strategies of the special self-governing provinces.



Strengthening Decentralization and Financial Support for the '5 Poles and 3 Special Regions Balanced Growth Strategy'

Strengthening decentralization and providing adequate financial support are prerequisites for the successful implementation of the '5 Poles and 3 Special Regions Balanced Growth Strategy'. In this case, a structure for responsibility allocation and cooperation between the metropolitan governments and basic local governments forming the super-regional area must be established, and institutional backing must be provided to ensure consistent implementation in a unified direction. If the formation or dissolution of special local governments becomes too easy, it will only cause confusion among residents, which is undesirable for the future of the Republic of Korea. While it is obvious that policy consistency is a crucial factor in gaining residents' support, the '5 Poles 3 Special Regions Balanced Growth Strategy' will succeed when we are mindful that maintaining this consistency is difficult.



Choi Hwan-yong hSenior Research Fellow Choi Hwan-yong completed his doctoral program at Nagoya University in Japan and received his Doctor of Juridical Science degree from the University of Seoul. His primary research areas are local autonomy legislation and marine environment-related legislation. He has held key positions including Vice President of the Korea Legislation Research Institute and currently serves as a private sector member on the Ministry of the Interior and Safety Policy Advisory Committee and the Statistics Korea Active Administration Committee. ✉ chy9465@klri.re.kr