

Chapter 19

JAPAN

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I INTRODUCTION TO THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

i Ownership of real estate

The basic ways in which real estate can be held are either holding ownership title to real estate directly or holding a beneficial interest in a trust that holds title to real estate in connection with large-scale commercial investments.

Land and buildings are considered separate and independent real estate. Therefore, one person can hold title to land while another person can hold the title to a building on the land. When different persons own a building and the parcel of land upon which the building is located, the two owners will typically enter into a contract such as a land-lease agreement where the building owner is permitted to use the land.

Joint title to real estate, which is governed by the rules under the Civil Code, is one form of title that can be held by multiple persons. Condominium title to a condominium that is part of a building, which is governed by both the rules under the Condominium Law and by the Civil Code, is another form of title that can be held by a single person separately from other condominium owners of the building.

Trust beneficial interests in real estate are typically issued when a real estate owner places the real estate in a trust. The trustee holds title to the real estate placed in the trust. The owner, on the other hand, holds a trust beneficial interest that represents a contractual relationship with the trustee under a trust agreement. Under this, the beneficiary may instruct the trustee to administer and manage the real estate in the trust and to distribute profits earned from the real estate (after deducting costs and expenses for administration

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and management of the real estate). Trust beneficial interests are used for various reasons, including delegating administrative duties from the beneficiary to the trustee and deferring taxes related to real estate transfers by transferring the trust beneficial interests instead.

ii System of registration

Ownership title and other property rights with respect to real estate are typically registered in the real estate registry maintained by local registration offices. Trustees are typically the registered owners of real estate that is placed in trust. The general rule is that transactions including the sale and purchase of real estate and creation of a mortgage on real estate take effect upon execution of agreements between the parties, and that no formalities are required; however, the holder of ownership title or other property rights with respect to real estate must have its interest registered in the appropriate real estate registry to assert its rights against a third party. This means that generally, to perfect a right over real property, there must be a valid agreement between the parties and the right must be registered in the name of the holder. The registration is governed by the Real Estate Registration Law.

While registration of a real property right in the name of a certain person does not necessarily mean that the person actually holds the registered right, registration is usually considered strong evidence. Neither the local registration office nor the government guarantees the accuracy of the real estate registry. A registration in the real estate registry only reflects and records the transactional activities that private persons described in their applications for registration.

iii Choice of law

In the context of a cross-border transaction, choice of law rules are provided in the Act on General Rules for Application of Laws. Under the Act, if the subject matter is a property right or other right that can be registered in the real estate registry, the law of the jurisdiction in which the real estate is located shall be the governing law; however, under the Act, any law chosen by the parties can govern a contract. Despite the Act permitting the parties to choose the governing law of the contract, parties usually choose Japanese law as the governing law of a sale and purchase agreement with respect to real estate, because of the rule that Japanese law governs property rights in Japan.

II OVERVIEW OF REAL ESTATE ACTIVITY

Since the early 1990s, various innovative real estate investment structures have been developed in Japan.

The GK-TK structure and the specified-purpose company (TMK) structure (discussed in detail in Section IV, *infra*) are frequently used for real estate investment. Japanese real estate investment trusts (J-REITs) (discussed in Sections IV and VII, *infra*) have made it possible for investors with smaller amounts of capital to invest in real estate through the purchase of listed J-REIT securities. The accumulated capital of the listed J-REITs has made them major players in the Japanese real estate investment market. The flow of capital through listed J-REITs into the real estate investment market has contributed to the growth of the real estate industry.

The increase in flexibility of such investment structures has resulted in a greater influx of domestic and foreign capital into real estate. The response to demand from an increasing

number of participants has made the real estate investment market more sophisticated and attractive, so that a number of investors consider the Japanese real estate market an important focus in their global investment strategy.

While the global economic turmoil in the late 2000s affected – and slowed down – activities in the Japanese real estate investment market (including activities by lenders), it also prompted further regulatory developments. The government has brought in various measures to relax regulations and enhance market activities. Since then, we have seen signs of a reversal in prices and transaction volume of real estate. The transaction volume for Japanese real estate in fiscal year 2014 recovered to the level nearly as high as that of fiscal year 2007, the previous watermark for high transaction volume prior to the global economic turmoil. After the transaction volume hit the high end, the transaction volume declined in 2015. However, the transaction volume in 2015 remained at the higher end, nearly as high as that of the fiscal year 2006 before the global economic turmoil began.

III FOREIGN INVESTMENT

There are no direct restrictions on acquisitions of commercial or residential real estate in Japan by foreign investors, either directly or through a vehicle. Similarly, establishment of a corporation by foreign investors to invest in commercial or residential real estate is not restricted. In theory, under the provisions of the Alien Land Law, a cabinet order may limit the rights of foreign investors related to land in Japan on the grounds of reciprocity or national security. At the time of writing, however, there has been no such limitation, since no such cabinet order has been issued.

Under the Agricultural Land Act, an authorisation by the relevant authority is required to acquire certain agricultural land. This authorisation can only be granted if the purchaser is qualified as a farmer or a qualified corporation for owning agricultural land. It would not be easy for foreign investors to be granted such an authorisation.

After a foreign investor's acquisition of shares or equity of a corporation, or acquisition of real estate or a right related to real estate, a post-transaction report to the government authority may be required pursuant to the Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Law (FEFTL). A post-transaction report of payment or receipt of payment may be required in the case of cross-border payments or payments between a foreign investor and a Japanese resident in accordance with the FEFTL.

IV STRUCTURING THE INVESTMENT

When choosing an investment structure, the legal, accounting and tax implications must be considered, because each can be a driving factor for the choice. The most popular structures and investment vehicles used for real estate investments in Japan are the GK-TK structure, the TMK structure and the J-REIT. The Real Estate Specified Joint Enterprise Act (REJEA) was amended in 2013 to enable a GK-TK structure (see below) to invest into real estate without requiring the GK as the TK operator vehicle itself to obtain a licence.

i GK-TK structure

A limited liability company (GK) is one type of corporate entity under the Companies Act. In some respects, it is similar to an LLC in the United States; however, it is not itself a

pass-through entity for tax purposes. When a GK is used as an asset investment vehicle, typically an investor leverages its investment by third-party loans and makes its own investment in the GK through a contractual anonymous partnership (TK) arrangement. The TK arrangement is a bilateral (not multilateral) contractual partnership relationship created for the investment purposes by the TK interest holder, called the TK investor. The other party to the contract is called the TK operator. Under the GK-TK structure, the TK operator is the GK. A TK arrangement qualifies for favourable tax treatment if the TK investor is a passive investor with minimal control over the management of the GK and the contributed funds under the arrangement. If the TK arrangement qualifies, the GK is permitted to deduct distributions to the TK investor from its taxable profits in addition to deducting debt payments. This tax-efficient combination of a GK and a TK arrangement is called a GK-TK structure.

Typically, a GK-TK structure has been used to make investments in trust beneficial interests in real estate, and loans backed by real estate. If a GK holds real estate directly, by raising funds from TK investors, it will generally be subject to a licensing requirement under the REJEA. Therefore, the GK-TK structure has usually been structured to invest in trust beneficial interests in real estate, not in real estate itself. An exemption from the licensing requirement under the REJEA (newly introduced in 2013) allows the GK-TK structure to invest in real estate itself if certain requirements are satisfied.

A GK-TK structure that is used to invest in a trust beneficial interest in real estate will subject the GK to the strict registration requirement under the Financial Instruments and Exchange Law (FIEL), unless an exception applies. One of the exceptions available under the FIEL is the QII exemption, which essentially requires that:

- a* there is at least one qualified institutional investor (QII) under the FIEL among the TK investors (the requirements to qualify as a QII are now stricter after the amendment to the relevant cabinet order and cabinet office ordinance under the FIEL, which became effective on March 1, 2016);
- b* the number of non-QII TK investors (if any) is 49 or less (non-QIIs are limited to certain categories after the March 1, 2016 amendment to the relevant cabinet order and cabinet office ordinance under the FIEL, while there were no limitations imposed on non-QIIs before the amendment);
- c* none of the TK investors is a disqualified investor as detailed in the FIEL; and
- d* the GK, as the operator of the TK arrangement, files with the government authority a notification regarding the QII exemption (the requirements for the notification to be filed by the GK are now more complex, compared to the previous simple requirements).

As noted above with respect to the relevant requirements, the requirements of the QII exemption were amended in 2016 (further discussed in Section VII, *infra*).

REJEA structure

The 2013 amendment to the REJEA allows a GK-TK structure to invest into real estate directly, without the GK as the TK operator vehicle needing to obtain a licence, if certain requirements are met. It is hoped that the new GK-TK structure under the amendment will enhance investment into real estate without the need to involve a trustee in respect of a trust beneficial interest at the underlying real estate level.

The new GK-TK structure under the amended REJEA essentially requires that:

- a* the GK must be established for the sole purpose of distributing proceeds and profits from transactions related to the subject real estate;
- b* the GK as the TK operator delegates (1) the management of transactions related to the subject real estate to a real estate specified joint enterprise business operator (REJEB operator) that is licensed to conduct its business under Article 2, paragraph 4, item 3 of the REJEA, and (2) the solicitation of investments into the TK operator by the TK investor (or investors) to a REJEB operator that is licensed to conduct its business under Article 2, paragraph 4, item 4 of the REJEA;
- c* only investors falling into one of the categories of 'special investors', which include a licensed REJEB operator and a QII (as defined under the FIEL), make TK investments in the TK operator; and
- d* the agreement for (1) as described at (b) above to be entered into between the GK and the REJEB operator must stipulate certain items specified under the REJEA.

Under this new requirement, the amended REJEA allows a licensed REJEB operator to be involved in a TK arrangement investing into real estate, not as a TK operator itself, but as a manager for the TK operator vehicle, as long as the delegation of the management covers (1) and (2) as described at (b) above.

To enhance the use of the new GK-TK structure, a GK-TK structure satisfying the above-mentioned requirements will benefit from reduced registration and licence tax, and real estate acquisition tax, when such a GK-TK structure acquires a building that is over a certain age, or acquires a building for the purpose of reconstruction. For more details on the reduction of these taxes, see Section V, *infra*.

ii TMK structure

A TMK incorporated under the Asset Liquidation Law (ALL) is another type of corporate entity often used as a real estate investment vehicle. This entity may only be used to liquidate or securitise certain assets. This investment platform is used to make investments in real estate, trust beneficial interests in real estate, and loans and TMK bonds that are backed by real estate. A TMK is typically funded by issuing TMK bonds and preferred shares that meet certain tax qualifications required for the preferential tax treatment of the TMK. If a TMK, its bonds and its preferred shares are properly structured, and the TMK meets certain other requirements under the Tax Code, it is permitted to deduct distributions to the preferred shareholders from its taxable profits in addition to deducting debt payments.

One of the requirements for the preferential tax treatment is that its TMK bonds be purchased by an institutional investor or other similar person or entity (a Tax II or equivalent investor) as defined in the Tax Code. Certain QIIs under the FIEL and certain other QIIs meeting additional requirements fall under the definition of a Tax II or equivalent investor. One of the important steps in setting up a TMK structure is to find a TMK bondholder that is a QII and is a Tax II or equivalent investor.

When using a TMK structure, it is also important for the TMK to comply with strict regulations under the ALL. These regulations include a requirement to file an asset liquidation plan with the government authority. The asset liquidation plan of a TMK outlines how its assets are to be liquidated or securitised. A TMK structure requires close attention being paid to the regulations regarding the asset liquidation plan.

iii J-REITs

A J-REIT is a type of investment fund formed under the Law concerning Investment Trusts and Investment Companies (ITL). A J-REIT established to invest in and manage real estate assets uses investors' funds to purchase real estate assets, in return for which investors receive investment units. The investment units of a J-REIT can be listed and traded on the stock exchange. If a J-REIT's investment units are listed, the J-REIT must comply with the rules of the stock exchange in addition to the ITL. Under the ITL, a J-REIT must retain an asset management company (a registered financial instruments operator under the FIEL) to manage its investment. In practice, all investment decisions for a J-REIT are designed to be made by its asset management company.

Unlike an ordinary corporation, which is subject to corporation tax on its profits, a J-REIT is exempt from taxation if certain requirements are satisfied, including:

- a* the J-REIT is not engaged in any business other than that permitted for J-REITs;
- b* the J-REIT would not be classified as a family corporation as defined in the Tax Code at the end of its fiscal period;
- c* the J-REIT distributes more than 90 per cent of its profits as dividends to the holders of its investment units for each fiscal period; and
- d* more than 50 per cent of the investment units on an aggregate issued amount basis have been offered in Japan.

The basic concept underlying the J-REIT legislation is that unlike a GK-TK structure or a TMK structure, a J-REIT's investments are not limited to certain assets specified at the time of its start-up. By raising long-term funds through a combination of debt and equity financing, a J-REIT can continue to accumulate and replace its investment portfolio for a longer term. At the same time, however, it would distribute most of its profits (more than 90 per cent) to the holders of its investment units for each fiscal period as described above, and therefore may not have sufficient internal reserve funds. When structuring a J-REIT, it is important to mitigate the potential risks of not having sufficient funds to deleverage its debt during an economic downturn. Since a J-REIT would practically be restricted regarding the amount of reserves it may retain, it should adopt another financial strategy to mitigate the potential risks, such as keeping its debt-to-asset ratio at a conservative level.

V REAL ESTATE OWNERSHIP

i Planning

City Planning Law

The City Planning Law is the primary national law that governs real estate development and zoning.

Under the City Planning Law, land development is strictly controlled in urbanisation control areas. Developers are required to obtain approval from local government authorities for developments in areas designated for urbanisation. Approval is given if the proposed development meets certain requirements under the City Planning Law.

There are various local laws established under the framework of the City Planning Law. Local government authorities are granted the power to control land use in accordance with the City Planning Law and the local laws.

Building Standards Law

The Building Standards Law provides regulations with respect to construction of a building, including regulations with respect to its use and the ratio of its total floor area to its site area.

Under the Building Standards Law, the appropriate local government authority must approve construction work for a building before the work commences. Furthermore, a completion inspection of the building by the appropriate local government authority is required upon completion of work.

ii Environment

Under the Soil Contamination Countermeasures Law, if a manufacturing factory that uses certain hazardous materials ceases its operations, the owner, manager or occupant of the land (the landowner) must examine the land and test for contaminants. In addition, in the case of the development of a large area of land (at least 3,000 square metres), the developer must notify the appropriate local government authority at least 30 days before any change is made to the land. After receiving such notice, if the authority determines that the land may be contaminated in the manner designated by the Soil Contamination Countermeasures Law, it may order the landowner to investigate. The local government authority also may order a landowner to examine land and conduct testing for contaminants if it determines that the land may harm the health of inhabitants in the neighbourhood through underground water or otherwise in the manner designated by the Soil Contamination Countermeasures Law. If the result of an examination of the land reveals that the relevant regulations have not been met, local government authorities will designate the land as a contaminated area and require appropriate measures, including cleaning up the land, to prevent public health from being impaired.

iii Tax

Stamp taxes, registration and licence taxes, and real estate acquisition taxes apply when the ownership title of real estate is transferred.

General

Stamp taxes are paid by affixing a revenue stamp on a taxable document. An agreement to transfer the ownership title to real estate requires a stamp tax of progressive amounts generally ranging from ¥200 to ¥600,000, based on the purchase price provided in the agreement. A range from ¥200 to ¥480,000 will apply to an agreement entered into between 1 April 2014 and 31 March 2018.

Registration and licence taxes are imposed when registering certain matters with respect to real estate with the appropriate local registry. The tax rate to register a transfer of ownership title to real estate is generally 2 per cent. A rate of 1.5 per cent will apply to a registration regarding a transfer of land occurring between 1 April 2013 and 31 March 2017, and a rate of 0.15 or 0.3 per cent will apply to a transfer of ownership title to certain qualified residential buildings that are acquired by an individual by 31 March 2017, to be used for residential purpose.

Real estate acquisition taxes are imposed on a purchaser of real estate at a rate of 3 per cent (for land and for residential buildings), or 4 per cent (for non-residential buildings); provided that the reduced tax rate of 1.5 per cent will apply to residential lands that are acquired by 31 March 2018.

Beneficial treatment

Transfer to a TMK

If a TMK acquires real estate and meets certain requirements, it may qualify for the following tax benefits:

- a* the registration and licence taxes to register the acquisition until 31 March 2017 will be reduced to 1.3 per cent; and
- b* the real estate acquisition tax rate is currently two-fifths of the original rate, and this reduced rate will apply until 31 March 2017.

Transfer of trust beneficial interest

Using a trust structure where the trustee holds ownership title to real estate provides certain tax benefits. Stamp taxes for real estate trust agreements and for sale and purchase agreements for a trust beneficial interest in real estate is ¥200, which is substantially less than stamp taxes for a sale and purchase agreement of real estate itself. While registration and licence taxes and real estate acquisition taxes will be imposed on a purchaser of real estate, the following reduced registration and licence taxes will be imposed on real estate being placed in trust, and on a trust beneficial interest in real estate being transferred from the initial holder to the purchaser:

- a* on placing the real estate in trust: 0.3 or 0.4 per cent (for land), or 0.4 per cent (for buildings); and
- b* on transfer of the trust beneficial interest: ¥1,000 for each building and piece of land.

Real estate acquisition taxes are not imposed on real estate when it is placed in trust or on transfer of the trust beneficial interest.

However, when the holder of a trust beneficial interest in real estate (other than the initial holder) terminates the trust agreement and receives delivery of the real estate from the trustee, registration and licence taxes at a rate of 2 per cent will be imposed upon registering the transfer of real estate. Upon such a transfer, real estate acquisition taxes will also be imposed on the beneficiary at a rate of 3 per cent (for land and for residential buildings), or 4 per cent (for non-residential buildings).

By applying the tax benefits of a trust structure as described above, a substantial amount of taxes related to a real estate acquisition can be deferred until the trust agreement is terminated and the real estate is delivered to the beneficiary.

Transfer of real estate to a GK-TK structure under the recent amendment to the REJEA

If a GK-TK structure under the recent amendment to the REJEA (as discussed in Section IV, *supra*) acquires an old building that needs to be rebuilt or renovated (defined as a building older than 10 years or a building seriously damaged by natural disasters), land planned to be used for a newly built building replacing an old building or built on unimproved land, or land used for a building that is to be renovated; by meeting certain other requirements, it may qualify for the following tax benefits:

- a* the registration and licence taxes to register the acquisition until 31 March 2017 will be reduced to 1.3 per cent; and
- b* the real estate acquisition tax rate is currently the half of the original rate, and this reduced rate will apply until 31 March 2017.

iv **Finance and security**

Mortgages on real estate are the most frequently used form of security interest in real estate.

In general, once the mortgage is registered, it is granted priority over unsecured creditors; however, even a registered mortgage is subordinate to tax claims against the mortgagor that became due prior to the registration of the mortgage. The registered mortgage will also be subordinate to any previously registered mortgages or other previously registered security interests on the same real estate.

Another form of security interest in real estate that is frequently used is a pledge over a trust beneficial interest in real estate. If real estate is held in the form of a trust beneficial interest in real estate, the lender would create a pledge over the trust beneficial interest and not a mortgage on the real estate itself. Perfection of the pledge is made by obtaining the consent of the trustee with a date certified by a notary public.

TMK bondholders are granted a security interest by operation of law, which is a statutory general security interest on all the current and future assets of the TMK granted in their favour under the ALL. The statutory general security interest will also secure (by operation of law under the ALL) all the TMK bonds subsequently issued. In many cases, therefore, holders of TMK bonds do not create a mortgage or pledge on the real estate or trust beneficial interest in real estate held by the TMK. This is mainly because the mortgage and pledge securing the bonds need to be held by a trustee in accordance with the Secured Bond Trust Law, and additional costs to establish such a trust arrangement are not considered economically justified in many cases.

VI **LEASES OF BUSINESS PREMISES**

The Land Lease and Building Lease Law (LLBLL) and the Civil Code regulate real estate leases. The general rule is that the LLBLL is applicable to land leases that are made for the purpose of the lessee owning a building on the land, and to building leases. The LLBLL takes precedence over the Civil Code when their provisions overlap.

i **Types of lease**

The LLBLL provides for various types of lease, including the following:

Land lease for the purpose of a lessee owning a building on the land

Ordinary land lease

Under the LLBLL, a land lease made for the purpose of the lessee owning a building on the land (other than a fixed-term land lease as discussed below) has a 30-year term, unless the parties agree to a longer term. Such land leases are automatically renewed for a term of 20 years for the first renewal and 10 years for subsequent renewals unless otherwise agreed by the parties. The lessor cannot object to such renewal without a justifiable reason. Generally, a justifiable reason is not easy to establish, and the lessor's refusal to renew the lease is strictly restricted.

Fixed-term land lease

A fixed-term land lease made for the purpose of the lessee owning a building on the land is not renewable under the LLBLL; however, the parties are not prohibited from entering into a new lease agreement at the expiry of the lease. Fixed-term land leases were introduced because

concerns of landowners about the strict restrictions on the ability of the owners of land to refuse to renew a land lease were considered to inhibit effective use of real estate. There are three types of fixed-term land leases:

- a* a general fixed-term land lease available for either residential purposes or business purposes (the fixed term is 50 years or longer);
- b* a land lease with a special agreement by which the lessee assigns the building on the land to the lessor (the lease agreement can provide for the lessor's right to obtain the building on the land from the lessee at a reasonable price to terminate the lease after 30 or more years following the commencement of the lease); and
- c* a fixed-term land lease for business purposes (the fixed term is 10 years or more but must be shorter than 50 years).

Building leases

Ordinary building lease

A building lease usually has an agreed term. Under the LLBLL, a building lease with an agreed term (other than a fixed-term building lease as discussed below) is automatically renewed and the lessor cannot object to the renewal of the building lease without a justifiable reason. Generally, a justifiable reason is not easy to establish and the lessor's refusal to renew the lease is strictly restricted.

Fixed-term building lease

A fixed-term building lease is not renewed under the LLBLL; however, the parties are not prohibited from entering into a new lease agreement at the expiration of the lease term. The parties can agree on the fixed term without restriction on its duration.

ii Typical provisions

There are typical provisions for leases of business premises in Japan regarding increase or reduction of rent, termination, and assignment of lease or sublease.

Rent increase or reduction

Under the LLBLL, if the amount of rent payable becomes inappropriate (e.g., if it differs significantly from the market rent), the lessor or the lessee may request that it be increased or reduced. This applies both to land leases made for the purpose of the lessee owning a building on the land and to building leases. The parties to the lease agreement, however, can eliminate the right to request an increase in rent by agreeing not to increase the amount of rent for a certain period. The right to request a reduction cannot be eliminated from a lease that is not a fixed-term building lease.

Termination

Under the Civil Code, if one party breaches an agreement, the other party can terminate it; however, under Supreme Court precedents, a lessor cannot terminate a real estate lease agreement if the lessee can establish the existence of a special circumstance where a relationship of mutual trust remains between the lessor and the lessee even after the breach. Failure to pay rent for several months would usually entitle the lessor to terminate the lease, because such non-payment would usually be regarded as destroying the relationship of mutual trust.

Assignment of lease or sublease

Lease agreements usually prohibit the lessee from assigning the lease or subletting without the consent of the lessor.

VII DEVELOPMENTS IN PRACTICE

i Increasing variety in real estate investments

Over the past few years there has been an increase in the variety of the types of investment assets involved in real estate investments in Japan. A rekindling of interest in privately offered J-REITs in recent years has also contributed to an increase in the variety of types of investment instruments.

Various types of investment assets – healthcare facilities and hospitals

There are three J-REITs listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange that invest in healthcare facilities and related real estate. Also, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) issued guidelines for investment by J-REITs in nursing facilities and medical facilities. These guidelines are intended to ensure that appropriate operators conduct appropriate operations of nursing facilities and medical facilities.

While the Japanese government is looking to expand the amount and availability of services provided by nursing facilities and medical facilities, funds from capital markets are invested into healthcare facilities and related real estate through the listed J-REITs. It is hoped this trend will grow and boost investment in new types of assets such as hospitals.

Various types of investment assets – hotels and accommodation facilities

While there are two J-REITs listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange that invest mainly in hotels, a dramatic increase in the number of foreign tourists visiting Japan in recent years has boosted the hotel business industry in Japan. Some factors that may have contributed to such increase include the ‘Visit Japan Business’ project of the MLIT’s Japan Tourism Agency, and the awarding of the 2020 Olympic Games to Tokyo.

The evolving tourism market has increased, and will continue to increase, the demand for hotels and accommodation facilities. Going forward, it is expected that more hotels and accommodation facilities will be necessary to meet the expanding demand, which will provide more investment opportunities in hotels and accommodation facilities. Separately from the investment capital being invested in hotels operated by hotel operating companies, there is a new business model of private property owners providing their properties (typically, units in apartments) for accommodation to tourists, which is called *minpaku*. This new business model is still evolving, and one of the most typically argued issues with this business model is the licensing issue. The government has not yet submitted to the Diet a draft of the new law regarding the *minpaku*. According to the newspapers, however, the government has a target to submit a draft of the new law to the National Diet in 2017. Once the law is enacted, there should be more clarity on the legal aspects of this new business model. We will see how this new business model will affect the existing and already established hotel business industry.

Rekindling of interest in privately offered J-REITs

The first privately offered J-REIT was established in 2010. Since then there has been a steady increase in the number of privately offered J-REITs. Currently there are more than twenty privately offered J-REITs with assets under management with a total value greater than 1 trillion yen.

Investors find various attractive features in privately offered J-REITs including:

- a* privately offered J-REITs typically provide unit-holders with a right to request redemption of their investment units (which allows unit-holders to have more than one exit option for their investment – sale and redemption of the investment units);
- b* the price or value of investment units of a privately offered J-REIT is determined based on real estate appraisals instead of the market price of the units, which is used in the case of listed J-REITs;
- c* the price or value of investment units of a privately offered J-REIT is not subject to significant fluctuation because it is not affected by the stock market;
- d* the term of investment in a privately offered J-REIT can be longer than other types of private real estate investment vehicles, which typically have a shorter investment term; and
- e* a privately offered J-REIT typically has a smaller number of professional investors, as compared to a listed J-REIT, which makes it easier for an asset management company of a privately offered J-REIT to obtain consent from investors for flexible selection of investment assets and flexible asset management, or even for waiver of strict investor protection rules.

A major reason for the recent trend of investment capital shifting toward privately offered J-REITs could be that the price or value of investment units in privately offered J-REITs is more stable than investment units in listed J-REITs, since privately offered J-REITs are by their nature unlikely to be affected by fluctuations in the stock market. What should also be noted is flexibility in (1) the selection of investment assets and (2) the asset management of the privately offered J-REITs to be brought about by a smaller number of professional investors. Lastly, availability of more than one exit method could attract more investors to privately offered J-REITs.

ii Upcoming amendment to the REJEA – A report from the working group organised by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism

On 16 September 2016, the working group for policy panel on real estate investment market organised by MLIT published a report concerning the REJEA amendments. This report proposed a creation of the new structure under the REJEA, called a ‘small-sized’ real estate specified joint enterprise business. This new concept intends to encourage more real estate business operators in suburban and rural areas to engage in business opportunities under the REJEA by relaxing the current statutory requirements imposed on REJEA operators, such as lowering a share capital requirement from ¥50-100 million to ¥10 million, while setting a cap on investments permitted under this ‘small-sized’ business. The report also mentions about provision of statutory documents in an electronic format under the REJEA in the context of crowdfunding (FinTech). The report further proposes a less regulated structure under the REJEA available only for ‘qualified specified investors’ (i.e., super professional investors).

According to media reports and public sources, MLIT is in the process of preparing the proposed amendment to the REJEA, and it is hoped the draft amendment will be submitted to the National Diet together with the proposal for a tax incentive.

iii Amendment to the QII exemption

Legislation for an amendment to the QII exemption was enacted, and promulgated as of 19 June 2015. The relevant cabinet order and cabinet office ordinance were also published on 3 February 2016 and the amendment to the QII exemption became fully effective on 1 March 2016.

The amendment will not change the underlying concept of the QII exemption (see Section IV, *supra*). However, it will change certain aspects of its substance. The following ‘stricter’ rules are introduced:

- a* additional requirements for GKs as operators of TK arrangements; a disqualification system are introduced for not admitting GKs as statutory qualified operators. Requirements for the notification to be filed by GKs with the government authority are now more complex, as compared to the previous simple requirements, including, for example, several newly required attachments to the notification. These requirements treat GKs in a manner similar to how registered financial instrument business operators are treated under the FIEL;
- b* applicable requirements on QII and non-QII investors in the structure of the QII exemption are now stricter;
- c* the regulations equivalent to those that regulate acts of registered financial instrument business operators under the FIEL, such as the principles of ‘suitability’ and ‘due care of a prudent manager’, are now applicable to GKs. GKs are required to prepare business reports and statutory books and documents; and
- d* the regulator is authorised to take necessary measures for supervisory purposes and issue business suspension or abolishment orders.

VIII OUTLOOK AND CONCLUSIONS

The past few years have seen an overall upward trajectory in the volume of real estate acquisitions taking place in Japan. At the same time, interest seems to be shifting to certain types of new asset classes, including healthcare facilities and hotels (discussed in Section VII, *supra*). After an overall trend of deregulation in order to encourage real estate transactions after the global economic downturn, the recent amendment to the QII exemption under the FIEL has tightened the regulation of the GK-TK structure (discussed in Section VII, *supra*). We see shifts and changes in various aspects of the Japanese real estate market. Combined with the cycle of the market, the shifts and changes are expected to create new opportunities for both domestic and global investors in the real estate sector. We should pay attention, not only to the high volume of real estate acquisitions in recent years, but also to the dynamism seen from other aspects of the real estate market whether regulatory or otherwise. We should thus get prepared for the next wave of real estate activity.

Appendix 1

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Norio Maeda is a partner with expertise in transactions involving the acquisition of, investment into and financing of Japanese real estate assets. He has represented domestic and foreign investors, including investment funds, financial institutions, investment managers and developers from the United States, Europe and Asia in numerous investment and development projects involving sophisticated structures. He has also represented lenders in numerous structured finance transactions involving real estate assets. His expertise extends to the restructuring of distressed real estate asset investments. He is admitted to the Bars of Japan and New York.

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