

Japan: Not as good as it looks

With the Fed looking more dovish, the Bank of Japan will be looking anxiously at the USD/JPY rate and wishing it had some effective tools left in its monetary arsenal. Unfortunately, it has none



Source: Shutterstock

No consumption tax hike leads to more stable growth and inflation forecasts

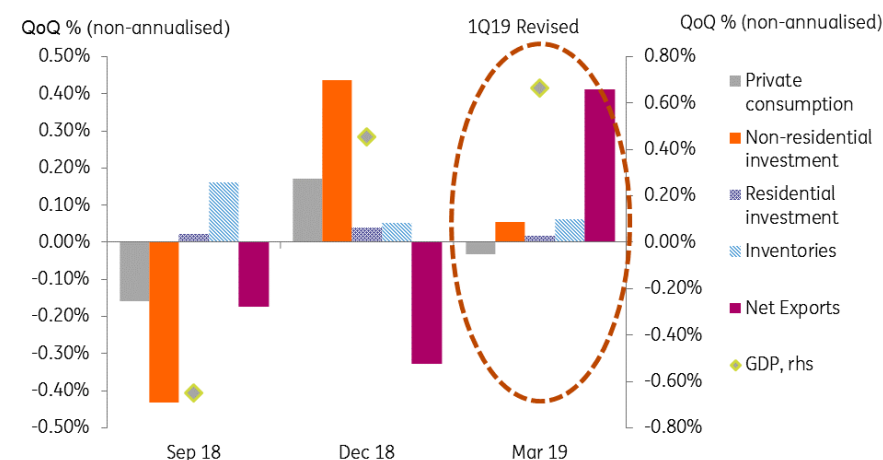
A few months ago, we took the gamble of removing the scheduled October consumption tax hike from our forecast numbers. The effect of this was to smooth both the inflation figures (we no longer have a 12-month bump from 4Q19 to 3Q20), and also the GDP figures (we no longer have the front loading and subsequent consumption and investment lacuna).

All of this is fairly cosmetic, and has very little bearing on overall annual GDP figures, though removing the tax hike does remove the temporary lift that inflation would otherwise get, and makes it harder to see by just how much the Bank of Japan is missing its 2% underlying inflation target.

The revised 1Q19 GDP figure of 2.2% is being touted as the final nail in the coffin for those like us who speculated on a third delay to the scheduled tax hike. But this contrasts with the other message of this release. Namely: outside of some very modest business investment figures, which show few signs of remaining positive in the coming quarters, much of the 2.2% annualised GDP growth came from a rogue net export figure which had imports falling far more sharply than

exports, and which in all likelihood, also presages a sizeable inventory drawdown in the quarters ahead.

Contribution to GDP (QoQ%)



Source: CEIC, ING

Softer data means no rush to re-insert consumption tax hike into the mix

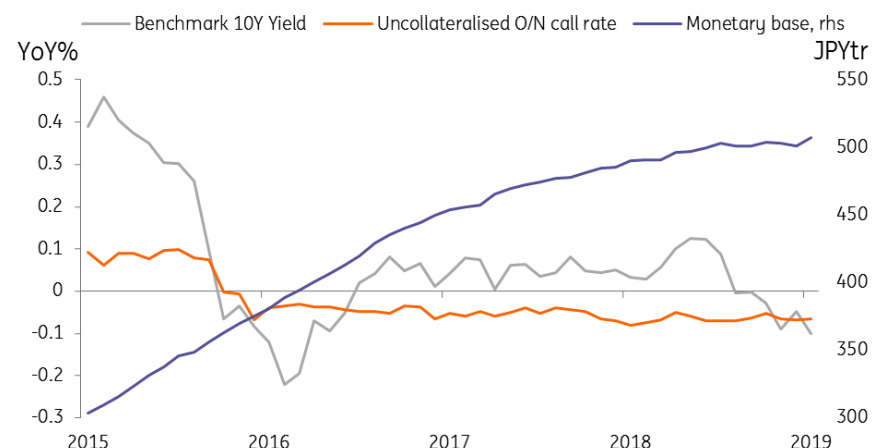
So although we concede that we may have to put the consumption tax hike back into the numbers, we won't rush this decision. Indeed, Japan's data remains moribund. Household spending started 2Q19 much softer than it ended 1Q19, which may also reflect the plunge in labour cash earnings, now running at a negative year on year rate.

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On the trade side, Japan is still running a marginal deficit, but there doesn't seem to be any noticeable improvement from 1Q19, so the likelihood this delivers any boost to 2Q19 GDP growth looks small. Indeed, unwinding the big boost in 1Q19 seems far more likely with the trade war showing no signs of easing and the technology slump still in full swing.

Furthermore, both construction orders and housing starts registered large declines in April and will have their work cut out to claw their way back to positive growth by the end of the quarter.

The BoJ's policy options – none are easy



Source: CEIC, ING

If the Fed cuts rates, the Bank of Japan might well follow suit

For its part, Japan's central bank is still talking up their potential firepower should renewed stimulus be needed, though Governor Haruhiko Kuroda also stresses the need to be wary of the unintended consequences of further easing. Kuroda notes that policy rates could be lowered still further (currently -0.1%), the target for 10-year bond yields could also be lowered, the monetary base could be expanded, or asset purchases could be boosted (which is almost the same as saying the monetary base could be expanded, so really three, not four options).

If the Federal Reserve cuts rates in the coming months, as markets seem to increasingly believe, then depending on how the Japanese yen responds, we might well see the Japanese central bank respond with some additional easing of their own. Though each of the measures outlined above comes with its own particular set of problems, and none are guaranteed to offset a generalised spell of USD weakness completely, should this follow a Fed rate cut.

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