Good MornING Asia - 17 September 2018

Natural disasters are not the time to be finessing GDP forecasts

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Batten down the hatches

Natural disasters are not the time to be finessing GDP forecasts

After hitting the Philippines, Typhoon Mangkhut glances Hong Kong and moves on to China

With reports putting the death toll in the Philippines at 64, and substantial collateral damage to agriculture as well as infrastructure, the people of Hong Kong were lucky that they did not get a full-on impact. Despite reports of a significant mess and likely clear-up operation, and flooding in Macau, there are no reports of any fatalities, as the typhoon moves on to mainland China.

The most recent Typhoon of a similar scale, was in 2003, Typhoon Haiyan, which wreaked $15.5bn damage on the Philippine archipelago. We would imagine something similar from Typhoon Mangkhut. Preventative measures seem to have averted more casualties in the Philippines and elsewhere, despite meteorological reports of sustained wind speeds in excess of 165mph and gusts of around 200mph.

Moreover, if it is possible to find silver linings in any of this, the clear up operations of natural disasters always lend GDP growth a boost, and the devastation in terms of balance sheet destruction of the economy tends to be short-lived.

Data from the region will be utterly messed up too over the coming months - it will not be easy to say anything sensible about activity or prices until the impacts of the typhoon have dissipated, and that could be months. This applies to China and Hong Kong, as well as the Philippines.

More tariffs will make the USD stronger

Reports that US President Trump wants to push forward with the $200bn of tariffs on China, even as US officials meet their trade opposites in Beijing to discuss a potential way forward, have pushed the dollar a little stronger today. Other reports have the Chinese saying they will skip the talks if the tariffs go ahead. All this is a bit conflicting, and we are not clear whether to make too much of this at the moment.

It would seem odd to be pushing ahead with a full $200bn of tariffs (and at what rate, all at 25%?) after the lengthy public consultation and reflection period. Our resting view had been, "no news was good news" since the longer the deliberation, the less clear the case would seem for the full-monty and the greater the case for a more targeted set of tariffs. But then that pre-supposed the President's reaction to the findings of the consultation, which is something we could not second-guess.

We will just have to wait and see on this, but there is a lot at stake, not least further USD strengthening, and EM appetite, which is likely to wane further depending on the detail of any announcement on this set of tariffs, plus any Chinese reaction.

Asia Day ahead

Singapore's Non-oil domestic exports staged a small bounce, as we expected in August after their July dip. The year on year growth rate fell back to 5.0%, a bit less than the 7% we had penciled in, but better than the 3.9% consensus view. Resilience in the Pharmaceutical sector, some steady production from petrochemicals, and a modest month on month rise in electronics helped lift the headline. The good news for Singapore is that net exports appear to have no discernible downtrend (or uptrend for that matter), merely whipping around in a 0-20% range, with a trend of about 7%YoY. The headline has been narrowly supported in recent month's though, so we are nervous that if this support fails in coming months, we could be looking at something much weaker.

Indonesian trade figures for August will help shed light on the state of Indonesia's external deficit, with consensus expectations looking for a narrowing in the deficit to -$607m from -$2030m in July. Still, the volatility of these figures is simply enormous, and we are not sure what we will be able to make of these figures even once we know them with certainty.

And this from Prakash Sakpal on India:

The Indian rupee gained some more ground on Friday ahead of the announcement of currency-supportive measures by the finance ministry late in the day. The new measures included relaxation of regulation of foreign borrowing of up to $50mn by manufacturing companies for a year as against the current minimum of three years; scrapping of withholding tax on masala (INR-denominated) bonds; and a possible easing of the current 20% limit on foreign ownership of corporate bonds. It’s hard to imagine these measures becoming immediately effective in curbing the currency depreciation pressure as the external payments situation remains on a deteriorating path.

While more measures are expected, the consensus is building up for more aggressive RBI rate hikes either at the upcoming meeting in early October or even before that. According to Bloomberg, the odds of a 50bp hike in October and again in the December meetings far outweigh the odds of 25bp moves. The recent downturn in inflation complicates the RBI policy decision. We aren’t completely discounting double-barrel rate hikes, while the latest print of 8.2% GDP growth in 1Q FY19 may well underpin an aggressive policy tightening. But we aren't rushing to change our view of two more 25bp hikes at the October and December meetings respectively, and a USD/INR rate of 73.5 by end-2018.

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Article | 17 September 2018

ASEAN Morning Bytes

General market tone: Risk-off. Trump gave the go-ahead signal to implement tariffs on Chinese imports worth up to $200 billion even after both the US and China appeared amenable to high-level talks in the near term to smooth out differences. China has threatened to walk away from the negotiating table should the US push through with the tariff salvo.

International theme: Trump lowers the boom, China threatens to walk away from negotiations

- August US retail sales clocked in below market expectations but investors opted to focus on the upward revision in July, pushing 10-year US Treasury yields past the 3% level with market pushing up the probability for a follow-through rate hike in December even after the Fed hikes in September.
- China responded to reports that Donald Trump was giving the go signal to implement tariffs on $200 billion worth of goods even as both sides appear amenable to renewed trade talks.

EM Space: Asian markets likely to head for cover with the US and China embroiled in renewed trade spat

- **General Asia:** Asian markets will likely take their cue from the reports that China would walk away from the negotiating table should Trump push through with tariffs on $200 billion worth of goods, indicating that it would be "negotiating with a weapon to their heads".
- **Singapore:** August NODX growth, 5.0% YoY and 0.4% MoM SA, was better than consensus. Electronics remained a drag on NODX growth, though a smaller drag than in July. Data shows no trade war impact just, keeping the MAS on track to maintain the "modest and gradual" SG$-NEER appreciation stance at the October policy review.
- **Indonesia:** Deputy Governor Dody Waluyo of the Bank of Indonesia projects the August trade deficit to remain in deficit although the gap will likely be less than the level seen in July. Deputy Governor Waluyo also indicated that the monetary authorities would continue to "guard the exchange rate" despite the IDR's appreciation in recent sessions.
- **Thailand:** The Thai government has announced plans to raise THB 1,164bn (7.5% of 2017 GDP) to finance the budget deficit, lending to state enterprises, and for debt restructuring in FY2019 (starting on 1 October 2018). It also plans to introduce new tenor of 20-year bonds. The fiscal pump-priming is needed to sustain the 4%-plus growth, as investment remains a missing link in the economy. Separately, the Board of Investment approved four investment projects worth THB 168bn (or about 1% of 2015 GDP) worth of investment projects in energy and other sectors. Investment remains a weak line in the economy even as GDP growth
- **Philippines:** The Philippines reported a current account deficit of $3.1billion for the first half of the year, which incidentally was the initial BSP's full-year forecast. The protracted trade deficit is seen to be the main reason the current account will stay in the red for the rest of the year. The Peso looks for some reprieve in overseas Filipino remittance data due on Monday with the market expecting flows to revert to growth.

What to look out for: Indonesia and the Philippines look for some good news on trade and remittances

- Philippine Remittances 9/17/2018
- Singapore non-oil exports 9/17/2018
- Indonesian Trade Balance 9/17/2018
- Japan BoJ meeting 9/19/2018
- Thailand BoT meeting 9/19/2018
- Euro zone consumer confidence 9/20/2018
- US existing home sales 9/20/2018
- US-China trade negotiations (deadline: end of September)
- Argentina-IMF credit line request (on-going)

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Snap | 14 September 2018 Philippines

Philippines: Current account gap widens in first half

Strong domestic demand has driven imports higher, pushing the current account gap to $3.1 billion in the first half of the year, or -1.9% of GDP. We expect the deficit to deteriorate further to between -2.3% and -2.9% of GDP

Source: Jun Acullador

-$3.1bn 1H current account

Equivalent to -1.9% of GDP

Current account gap deteriorates

Strong domestic demand has driven the current account imbalance through higher imports. Domestic demand jumped by 9.2% year-on-year in the first half from 6.7% in the same period last year. We expect domestic demand, on average, to grow by 8.2% in 2018 from last year's 6.9%. Strong import growth reflects this with an average increase of 13% in the first half.

Exports, on the other hand, contracted by 3.4% in the first half. Weak exports and strong imports combined to push the trade deficit up by 61% to $19 billion in the first half of the year. Overseas remittances during this period only posted a 2.6% year-on-year increase to $14.2 billion, which is

$4.7 billion short of financing the trade gap.

The shortfall is now the norm and drives the wider current account deficit. The current account deficit amounted to -$3.1 billion in the first half, which is the central bank's deficit forecast for the full year. We estimate this gap to be equivalent to -1.9% of GDP.

What's next?

The outlook is unlikely to show any improvement. We expect this year's current account deficit to amount to between -$7.7 billion and -$9.8 billion or between -2.3% and -2.9% of GDP. This imbalance is increasingly weighing on the Philippine peso though capital inflows and a hawkish central bank could moderate or offset the weakening bias.

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Article | 14 September 2018 India

India: August economic data round-up

Positive economic data for August released this week instilled some life in the Indian rupee (INR). But the worst isn't over just yet. We expect the central bank to raise rates by another 50 basis points before the year-end, and wouldn't be surprised if it hikes by more than that. But we aren't changing our view of the USD/INR trading up to 73.50 by end-2018

Lower inflation and the external trade deficit data for August this week provided a break in the Indian rupee (INR) sell-off underway since early August, lifting the currency by 1.2% from an all-time low of 72.70 against the USD hit earlier in the week. The softer USD against G-10 currencies, and by extension against emerging market currencies, also deserves mention. We aren't too excited though, as we consider the recent dip in inflation and trade balance reversible. So is the dip in the USD/INR rate. Despite some gain, the INR remains one of the Asian underperformers with depreciation on a week-on-week basis. We are sticking to our view of the USD/INR rising to 73.50 by end-2018.

$17.4bn

August trade deficit

As expected

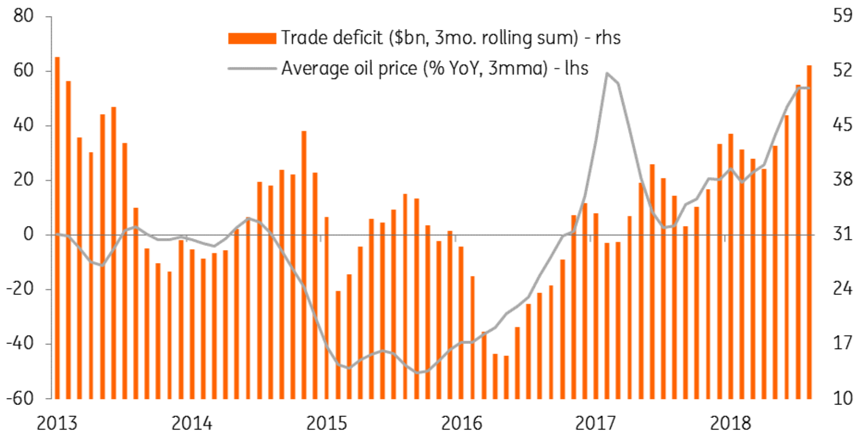
Some good news on the trade deficit

The trade deficit fell in line with the consensus to US$17.4bn in August from US$18bn in the previous month. Additional good news is the fall came from faster export growth, not from higher imports. Exports grew by 19% year-on-year, up from 15% in July. Imports were up by 25%, slower than 28% growth in July. Judging by higher average oil prices in August, oil continued to be the main import driver. A separate report showed that daily volume of oil India imported jumped by 16% YoY in August.

The lower trade deficit allows little room for the authorities to relax though. The three-month rolling total of the deficit is the highest since early 2013, as the chart below shows the deficit tracking oil price inflation. Strong domestic demand and high global oil prices are likely to sustain this trend in the months ahead.

The August trade report followed on the 1Q FY19 balance of payment data a week ago (late Friday, 7 September), showing a five-year high current account deficit of US$15.8bn. This intensified the INR selling pressure at the start of the trading week before the positive inflation report for August stemmed the currency weakness.

Oil drives trade deficit



Source: Bloomberg, CEIC, ING

And also good news on inflation

Consumer price inflation slowed to a 10-month low of 3.7% YoY in August from 4.2% in July. The slowdown was consistent with the consensus forecast, though this informs more about what happened a year ago than what happened this year – the high base-year effect due to new Goods and Services Tax implementation causing sharp spikes in CPI components across the board.

Housing, utilities and transport prices persisted as the main inflation driver, while food price inflation dipped to the lowest level in more than a year. Stripping out food and fuel prices from the total, Core CPI inflation also eased to 5.9% in August from 6.3% in July. And the wholesale price measure was down to 4.5% from 5.1% over the same months.

The favourable statistical base in the inflation index is unlikely to go away until early 2019, thus keeping inflation subdued, and under the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) 4% medium-term target, through the end of the year. But this could as well be countered by high global oil price transmitting into domestic fuel prices, increase in imported inflation due to the weaker currency, and administrative measures such as a hike in minimum support prices for farm products. We maintain our 4.8% average inflation forecast for FY19.

Also released this week, industrial production growth eased to 6.6% YoY in July from 6.9% in June, yet signalling strong GDP growth in the current quarter.

Authorities are dragging their feet on FX measures

Headlines of the government and the RBI contemplating measures to stem currency weakness flooded the financial media this week, but there have been no announcements as yet. Among the widely talked-about measures are a central bank policy rate hike, exchange market intervention, tapping funds from overseas Indians, raising import tariffs, and swap window for oil companies.

The consensus is building up for more aggressive RBI rate hike either at the upcoming meeting in early October or even before that. According to Bloomberg, the odds of a 50 basis points (bp) hike in October and again in the December meetings far outweigh the odds of 25bp moves. The RBI targets inflation, not the exchange rate. However, we believe the currency weakness prompted two rate hikes in June and August this year when inflation wasn't quite out of control. We aren't completely discounting double-barrel rate hikes, while the latest print of 8.2% GDP growth in 1Q FY19 may as well underpin an aggressive policy tightening.

But the question is: will the central bank want to risk higher rates denting economic activity. We remain of the view that the RBI is accommodating the currency depreciation pressure from external contagion, whereas in-target domestic inflation and strong growth weaken the tightening argument. Although a weak currency is bad for inflation, it is good for exports in a global trade war environment and for reining in the external deficit. We have pencilled in a 25bp hike each in October and December, taking the policy rate to 7.0%. We maintain our view of the USD/INR rate trading towards 73.50 by end-2018.

India: Economic forecast summary

India (FY April-March)	2017	1Q18	2Q18	3Q18F	4Q18F	2018F	2019F
Real GDP (% YoY)	6.7	7.7	8.2	7.5	6.8	7.2	7.0
CPI (% YoY)	3.6	4.6	4.8	4.5	4.6	4.8	5.3
RBI repo rate (%, eop)	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.50	7.00	7.00	7.50
3M T-bill rate (%, eop)	6.15	6.09	6.46	6.90	7.40	7.40	7.80
10Y govt. bond yield (%, eop)	7.23	7.40	7.90	8.10	8.50	8.50	8.80
INR per USD (eop)	63.87	65.18	68.47	72.80	73.50	73.50	72.50
Note: Annual growth and inflation forecast on financial year basis, rest on calendar year basis.							

Source: Bloomberg, CEIC, ING

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