Good MornING Asia - 22 April 2020

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By Robert Carnell

Asia Morning Bites

ASEAN Morning Bytes

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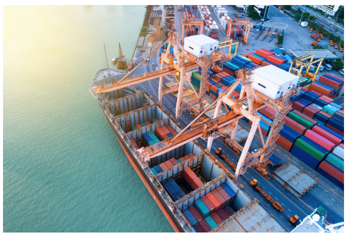

Thailand

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Mood sours on oil

Stocks were looking precarious yesterday on the back of the collapse in front-month WTI futures to an unprecedented negative level. That contract expired yesterday, and the negativity has transferred straight to the new June contract. Admittedly this has recovered a bit, having traded as low as $6.50 and is now running at about $13.93, but it highlights that yesterday was not a one-day blip, but a problem that is going to need to be dealt with and priced in until US oil supply drops enough to eat into the supply glut, or demand recovers sufficiently to do the same.

As the demand story rests upon opening up the states again, and as that rests upon the Covid backdrop, we'd have to say that we wouldn't be holding our breath that demand provides much of the heavy-lifting in this process. New Covid-19cases in the US ran at about 28,000 yesterday, close to where they have been in the last week or so. ANd they look like they will come in about the same today as the numbers roll in ((just over 27,000 at the time of writing). I think you could just about say that there was a downward trajectory developing, but it is a very shallow one. Supply will, therefore, be more likely to be the main mover in this oil story.

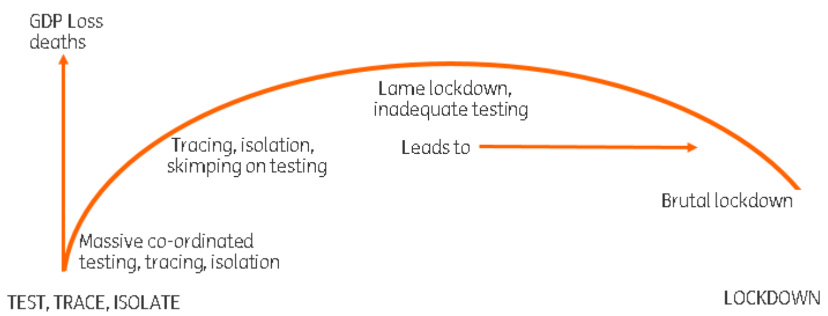
Creeping lockdown will hit GDP in Singapore

The extension to the "circuit-breaker: in Singapore to June 1 will have a negative effect on GDP, and Prakash Sakpal talks more about this below. In my view, the Covid-19 impact on an economy rests heavily on the policy response to it. We can represent this as a lopsided inverted smile as in the diagram below.

The vertical y-axis of this stylistic diagram (hence no units) is the damage (loss) to the GDP counterfactual. The higher you go, the bigger the loss compared to what would have happened. The horizontal x-axis takes you from a high-testing, high-tracing, high-isolating approach on the far left, which exemplifies Korea's approach to the pandemic, across to the far right, where you have a fairly brutal Wuhan-style lockdown, which we can typify as the Chinese response. The loss from lockdowns is always greater than a test-test-test model, but if you miss the boat on testing (which most economies did), and can't deliver that model, then a rapid and total lockdown (we would argue) hurts less and is over more quickly than a creeping piecemeal lockdown. This ends up just lasting longer as it is far less effective at squeezing out infection rates. But it crimps consumer spending almost as much while it is in place.

Singapore probably now joins Japan in such middle-ground, though we would probably put Indonesia's half-hearted movement restrictions at the very lower end of the effectiveness table, which suggests to us that at some stage, they will be compelled to adopt a much more restrictive approach. This is the main reason that Nicholas Mapa is chopping his 2020 forecasts for Indonesian GDP to -0.5%, joining the ranks of all the other lockdown negatives for the year. In contrast, our forecast for Korea is about flat for the year - not a bad outcome all things considered, and we may end-up revising it higher if all goes well.

Stylistic diagram representing Covid-19 response and loss of GDP



Source: ING

Stylistic response chart

Circuit breaker extension and other ASEAN news

(From Prakash Sakpal)

Singapore: The government extended its circuit-breaker measures by four weeks until 1 June given the accelerated Covid-19 spread over the last few days. It also ramped up support measures with

S$3.8 billion of additional budget spending on job support schemes. Even so, the extended circuit breaker means a bigger dent to GDP growth in the current quarter than we earlier thought and a prolonged recovery once the pandemic ends, whenever that is. We are cutting GDP growth forecast for 2Q20 to -6.8% YoY from -4.5% and for the full-year 2020 growth to -3.7% from -2.6% earlier.

Malaysia: March consumer price data is due. The sharp slump in demand due to the Covid-19 lockdown beginning in mid-March underscores the consensus view of inflation slipping into negative territory, -0.1% YoY down from +1.3% in February. We expect food and transport prices to be the key negatives here. This brings further support to our forecast of an additional 50bp Bank Negara rate cut in this quarter.

Thailand: Trade dodged Covid-19 pain in 1Q20 with a 0.9% YoY rise in exports and only a 1.9% fall in imports in the quarter. The continued large trade surplus suggests net trade contributed positively to GDP growth in the last quarter, but probably only to be outweighed by the increasing drag from weak domestic spending and stalled tourism. We consider our -2.2% YoY 1Q GDP growth view at risk of a downside miss (data due in mid-May), keeping the Bank of Thailand on course for a further 50bp rate cut in the current quarter.

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ASEAN Morning Bytes

Crude oil meltdown will continue to weigh on sentiment with investors looking past possible fresh US stimulus

EM Space: The sting from yesterday's oil crash-induced sell-off will linger today

- **General Asia:** The tone from yesterday's sell-off will likely be carried over to today with expectations for a deep and lasting economic downturn likely to dominate trading. Meanwhile, the US is one step closer to providing additional stimulus to help support small businesses. Expect economic gloom to weigh on trading sentiment today with select countries in the region tightening (Indonesia) or extending lockdown (Singapore) measures with new Covid-19 cases on the rise.
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- **Philippines:** Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) Governor Diokno shifted his growth expectations to match the national government, indicating that growth in 2020 could stall to 1.0%. Overseas Filipino remittances which provide a steady stream of income from abroad may contract 2.5% in 2020 due to Covid-19 with 16,000 Filipinos sent back the Philippines since March. The loss of remittance support to consumption coupled with the 2-week extension to the lockdown knocks down our growth forecast for the Philippines to -0.1% in 2020.
- **Indonesia:** President Jokowi issued a local travel ban with a survey indicating that roughly 25% of the population still planned to travel for the Ramadan holiday while 7% had already left. Indonesia continues to push back on hard lockdown measures to curb Covid-19 and now has the second-highest number of confirmed cases in the region despite relatively poor testing capability. An eventual full lockdown for Indonesia will likely push growth prospects lower and we are revising our Indonesia GDP forecast to -0.5% for 2020.

What to look out for: Covid-19 developments

- Philippines remittances and GIR (22 April)
- Malaysia inflation and GIR (22 April)
- Taiwan unemployment (22 April)
- Singapore inflation (23 April)
- Taiwan industrial production (23 April)
- US initial jobless claims and new home sales (23 April)
- Singapore unemployment and industrial production (24 April)
- US durable goods orders University of Michigan sentiment (24 April)

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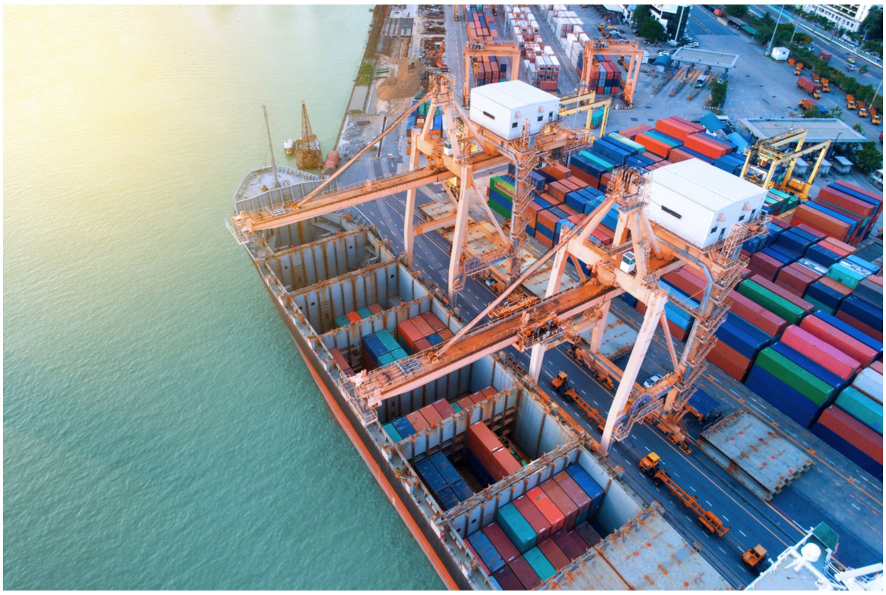
Article | 21 April 2020 Thailand

Thailand’s trade dodged Covid-19 pain in the first quarter

The surprising trade strength earlier this year looks to be transitory, potentially giving way to a significant slump in the current quarter



Source: Shutterstock

4.2% March export growth

Year-on-year

Higher than expected

Exceptionally strong trade growth

Thailand’s trade data for March came in as a pleasant positive surprise. Exports rose by 4.2% year-on-year in the last month, beating the consensus of a 5.8% fall. Imports grew faster, by 7.3%, against the consensus estimate of an 8% fall. These were the strongest yearly gains in both indicators in more than a year. And it was not just a low base year effect. The underlying strength was also reflected in strong month-on-month (not seasonally adjusted) gains of 8.5% in exports and 24.3% in imports.

We surmise some of this strength could be from a possible front-loading of shipments amidst a dampening outlook due to the Covid-19 outbreak and ahead of the state of the emergency that came into force on 26 March.

Among the main export drivers, electronics gained some traction with 8.6% YoY growth, but autos and parts continued to be weak, with a 5.6% fall. The combined exports of these two sectors account for 29% of Thailand's total exports. Fuel and raw materials helped on the import side, with 9% and 12% growth, respectively, while capital and consumer goods imports contracted.
But outshining everything was the jewellery trade, with a 72% bounce in exports and 53% bounce in imports in this sector.

The surprising trade strength so far this year is going to be transitory, giving way to a significant slump in this quarter as the accelerated global spread of the disease depresses demand.

But no end to Thai baht's plight

The trade balance eked out a $1.6 billion surplus in March, bringing the cumulative surplus in the first quarter of 2020 to $3.9 billion or $1.8 billion higher than a year ago. This should keep the current account in surplus in the first quarter; at $8.8 billion, the current surplus in the first two months of the year was $1.6 billion above the year-ago level (March data isn't due until 30 April). However, with virtually no dollar inflows from tourism, we would imagine a narrower current surplus in the first quarter and also in the rest of the year than in 2019. The current surplus amounted to 7% of GDP in the last year. This year we expect it to be almost half of that.

A narrower current surplus explains the Thai baht's (THB) plight this year as an emerging market underperformer, a significant reversal of fortune from last year when the baht was the strongest emerging market currency. Currently at 32.50 against the US dollar, the THB exchange rate has depreciated by 7.7% so far this year. We see a further depreciation to 35 by the end of this quarter.

Whether the weak currency will help trade to recover once demand returns is something we aren't thinking about just yet as the pandemic continues.

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