

Good MornING Asia - 27 June 2019

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Source: Shutterstock

Another manipulator - they're everywhere

Although not part of our formal coverage, we like to keep a weather-eye on Vietnam. It is both an amazing country to visit, but also one whose economy shows enormous potential, and it is one of the top contenders for additional coverage if resources ever allow.

So I read with interest again comments reported on Bloomberg and attributed to the US President that Vietnam is a "manipulator". The remarks seem to have been spurred by the observation that Vietnam is a beneficiary of relocated production from China stemming from the US-China trade war. It is. I'm not sure that makes them a manipulator. [According to the Office of the US Trade Representative](#) Vietnam was the US' 17th largest trade partner in 2017, and the goods and services trade deficit with Vietnam was \$37.3bn over the same period.

But in terms of the currency itself, though there are no real effective or nominal effective exchange rate indices readily available unlike most of its more developed Asian peers, the VND does not behave much differently from most other Asian currencies. That is to say that it shows a period of extreme stability, followed by the occasional wobble. In other words, it doesn't look like a clean

float, but equally, bouts of weakness seem to be mainly market-driven, not policy responses.

The depreciation of May, followed by the June recovery are good examples of this. The VND stands less than 2% weaker versus the USD as a result. That is certainly at the weaker end of Asian currencies, though less than the CNY over the same time frame, and given that China is one of Vietnam's biggest trading partners, suggests that the VND has seen a slight effective appreciation over this period.

India does find US in listening mood

Likewise, India, which expressed optimism that a resolution would be obtained with the US after it had its preferential trading status removed some weeks ago, has found the going tough, and talks with Mike Pompeo have yielded little.

I remember sarcastically quipping at the time that I thought they would be lucky to get anything out of the US. My cynicism seems to have been vindicated.

All of which proves nothing, except that you would be betting against recent evidence if you went into the weekend optimistic over a potential trade deal. It might work out well for you, and this administration is hard to predict, but recent signs are not encouraging. [You may also want to read this](#)

Thai court to look into opposition claim

Thailand has been in the news recently, with the Bank of Thailand keeping rates unchanged again this week - though the mood certainly does seem to be changing. See Prakash Sakpal's comments below for more on this.

But the other reason for Thailand to be in the news is that Thailand's constitutional court is looking into a petition against 32 lawmakers from the ruling coalition. If these lawmakers end up being disqualified, it would cut the government's thin (4-seat) majority in the lower house and could throw Thailand's government back into uncertainty. The THB does not seem particularly moved by this development as yet, looking pretty steady at 30.75 against the USD. But that could change.

Other Asia news

(From Prakash Sakpal) As noted above, the Bank of Thailand didn't change policy rates this week. The policy committee unanimously left the policy rate at 1.75%. Even so, [the statement](#) was largely dovish, acknowledging downside growth risks from weak exports and tourism inflows. The BoT also cut its growth forecast for 2019 to 3.3% from 3.8% but retained inflation forecast at 1.0%. We don't see them defying easing pressure for too long. With little prospect for fiscal stimulus, monetary policy will have to do all the heavy-lifting. With the government still looking shaky given the constitutional court investigation into coalition lawmakers, any fiscal stimulus is only likely with a considerable delay. We retain our forecast of a 25bp rate cut in 3Q19.

(And from Iris Pang) The State Council of China decided on 26 June to further reduce taxes and fees for small firms to reduce their operating costs. As well as cuts to taxes and fees, measures also expand collateral from small firms to borrow from banks, and lower interests rates for such firms when borrowing. We see these tax and fee cut policies as a pre-emptive move to support the

economy from the lingering trade and technology war between China and US. (For our readers of Chinese, [here is a link](#))

Author

Robert Carnell

Regional Head of Research, Asia-Pacific

robert.carnell@asia.ing.com

ASEAN Morning Bytes

General market tone: Risk-off. The mixed rhetoric on trade adds to the prevailing uncertainty about the Trump-Xi meeting at G20



EM Space: Mixed rhetoric on trade ahead of G20

- **General Asia:** The investors continue to tread a cautious path as the US's mixed rhetoric on trade – yesterday's talk about suspension of tariff on \$300bn of Chinese goods followed by the threat of more tariffs – adds to the prevailing uncertainty about the Trump-Xi meeting at G20.
- **Malaysia:** CPI inflation was steady at 0.2% YoY in May as higher food, beverages, and entertainment prices – all resulting from a seasonal surge in demand during the Ramadan month – offset lower housing and transport costs. While the period of low inflation is over we don't see significant inflation pressure ahead even as the low base effect from the elimination of GST a year ago will cause a significant inflation spike in June. We don't rule out more BNM easing this year if it's required to support growth.
- **Philippines:** The Bureau of the Treasury (BTr) plans lower borrowing of PHP 230bn in 3Q than PHP 315bn programmed for 2Q. Awash with cash given an improved collection and weaker government spending, the government opted to hold T-bill auctions bi-weekly instead of weekly, while bond auctions were scheduled in the longer end of the curve. Lower borrowing may reinvigorate the rally in local bonds even as market players look to the inflation forecast from the BSP later in the week.
- **Thailand:** The Bank of Thailand policy committee unanimously left the policy rate at 1.75%. Even so, the statement was largely dovish, acknowledging downside growth risks from weak

exports and tourism inflows. The BoT also cut its growth forecast for 2019 to 3.3% from 3.8% but retained inflation forecast at 1.0%. We don't see them defying the easing pressure for too long. Absent any scope of fiscal stimulus the monetary policy will have to do all the heavy-lifting. Three months since the 24 March election and the government is still in the formation stage. It won't be in place until late July. This bodes ill for routine government spending, leave alone the prospects of any fiscal stimulus. We retain our forecast of a 25bp rate cut this year, sometime in 3Q.

What to look out for: G20 meeting

- China industrial profits (27 June)
- US 1Q GDP – final estimate (27 June)
- Eurozone CPI (28 June)
- **G20 Summit in Osaka (28 June)**
- Japan labor report and manufacturing (28 June)
- Korea industrial production (28 June)
- Thailand balance of payments (28 June)
- US Core PCE deflator (28 June)
- US Michigan sentiment (28 June)

Malaysia: Very low inflation is over

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0.2% May CPI inflation

Lower than expected

Another downside CPI miss - seventh in a row

Malaysia's consumer price inflation in May was unchanged from April's 0.2% year-on-year rate. This was contrary to the consensus view of an acceleration to 0.3%, which makes it the seventh consecutive downside surprise.

The CPI breakdown showed higher food, beverages, and entertainment prices– all resulting from a seasonal surge in demand during the Ramadan month – being offset by lower housing and transport costs. While food inflation continued to grind higher, transport inflation persisted as the big drag on the headline CPI.

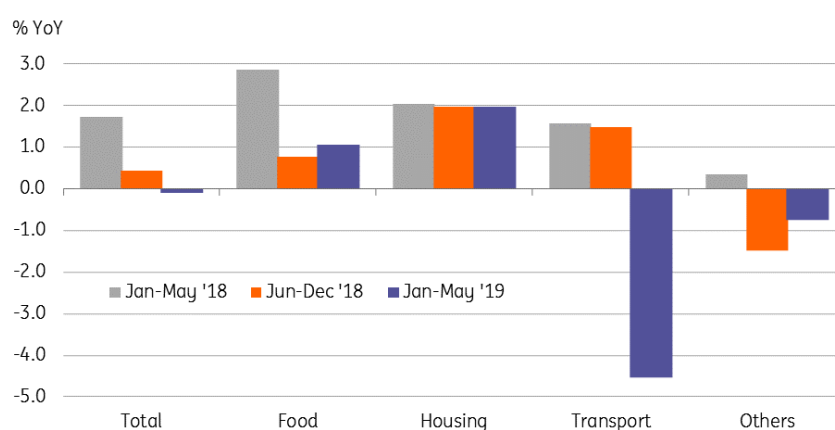
Best is behind us, worst isn't on horizon

This was probably the last month of the very low inflation trend, which started in June 2018 with the eliminated goods and services tax (GST). As the GST impact moves out of the base effect, inflation is likely to move into a 1.5-2.0% range for the rest of the year.

Not a worry just yet. We don't see inflation becoming a threat anytime soon. And even if food inflation gets a further boost from a GST-related slump in the second half of 2018, this will likely be countered by weakness in other CPI components such as clothing, healthcare, communication, and miscellaneous goods – all implying well-anchored inflation expectations.

Average inflation in the first five months of the year is still negative (-0.1% YoY). We see downside risk to our full-year 2019 average inflation forecast of 1%, though we maintain it for the time being to see how the GST base effect really pans out. In all likelihood, the annual rate will be closer to the low end of the Bank Negara Malaysia's (BNM) 0.7-1.7% forecast range for the year.

Consumer price inflation by main components



Source: Bloomberg, CEIC, ING

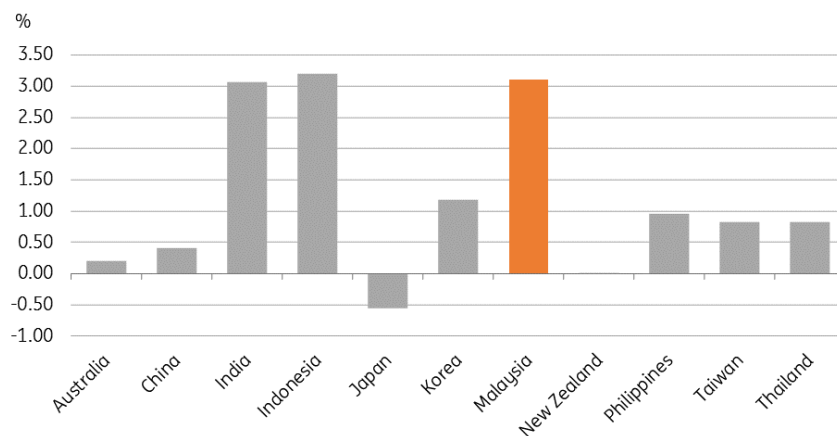
Doors open for more BNM easing, if needed

We are re-considering our view of BNM leaving monetary policy on hold for the rest of the year as the global easing wave is now getting even stronger than before.

Not that the BNM is behind the curve. As insurance, it cut the overnight policy rate by 25 basis point to 3.0% at the last meeting on 7 May. Unlike most other Asian economies, economic activity here has been relatively firm. Malaysia's GDP growth probably hit a cycle low of 4.5% in 1Q19, with full-year growth likely to be close to the top end of the central bank's 4.3-4.8% forecast range for the year.

The next BNM policy meeting is scheduled for 9 July. We believe the central bank will continue to assess economic risks as fairly balanced between growth and inflation but, at the same time, leave the door open for a policy rate cut or two later in the year. Unless inflation gets out of hand due to the higher global oil price, which is not our baseline view, a relatively high real interest rate allows scope for more BNM easing, if needed.

Asian real interest rates



Source: Bloomberg, CEIC, ING

Note: Central bank policy interest rate minus year-to-date average CPI inflation.

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