

## Good MornING Asia - 8 May 2018

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By Robert Carnell



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#### Taiwan import slackness reveals long-term export weakness

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## Trump might say “no”...

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### Iran: US in or out?

Markets are confused and so am I. Within minutes of Trump saying that he would make his decision on the Iran nuclear agreement today in Washington, crude oil prices spiked higher - WTI through \$70/bbl and Brent through \$75/bbl. But then prices fell back. Why? We aren't entirely clear. On the one hand, it could be that European diplomats believe they are close to getting Trump to stay in the deal. On the other hand, it could be comments from Iran's PM Rouhani that Iran will stay in the accord even if the US leaves.

If the latter, then we think that is very near-sighted reasoning. If the US leaves the accord, then few nations will take the risk of trading with Iran, for fear of US sanctions. It doesn't matter what your country decides about Iran if in the process it cuts your businesses off from US trade.

So right now, for me, the only question is whether Trump says "yes" or "no" to the agreement. "No" will be a much easier sell to the US electorate, and for that reason alone, I believe that is what Trump will decide. It's all about popularity. And right now, his is poor.

### Financial markets beginning to move again

Markets are showing a little more direction again, with the USD making ground again against the EUR, and consolidating below the 200-day moving average. US Treasury bond yields haven't budged though, and remain at 2.95%. It feels like they just can't go up from here. But they don't

want to go down either. Stocks are showing signs of being upbeat - which given the ambiguity of the Iran story, seems wrong, but it takes a lot to take the smile off most equity investors. So until the bad news is broadcast with loudhailers from the Whitehouse, this mood will probably stick.

## Day ahead

It's another quiet day in the G-7, with some markets just coming back from holidays. The US NFIB survey is worth a look. It has been pointing (irrelevantly, it turns out) to labour shortages and wage increases. The message may be wrong as far as the main official data on wages are concerned. But as the message becomes louder, the greater the chance that we will finally see some pass through in terms of the non-farm private hourly wages rate, currently stuck at a measly 2.6%YoY.

JOLTS job openings (also due today) and other related JOLTS data have also been sending clear signs of overheating US labour markets for a while. And like the NFIB, it hasn't been working at historical levels. But as the signal grows, this too could become more meaningful. Both worth a watch - though to be treated with care.

German Trade data and industrial production for March could show tentative signs of Europe shrugging off the first quarter soft-patch that enveloped it. If so, it could provide the EUR a crumb of comfort, though it will take more than this to get the ECB taper story for the Summer back up and running again.

In the Asia Pacific region, Chinese Trade data will be foremost on the radar, against the background story that China's Liu He will be heading off to the US next week to pick up trade talks again. Involving Liu He at this level does suggest China is taking this issue very seriously, though is in no mood to be bullied. Some weaker trade data today would certainly make He's job a little easier. I hope that both US and China trade officials explore constructive opportunities for mutual advancement, such as the development of Alaskan LNG liquefaction trains for export of LNG to Asia (China). This is a win-win for both countries and could make a serious dent in the bilateral deficit whilst at the same time, enabling China to clean up its industrial power footprint.

Taiwan CPI is also due today, with the headline likely picking up, but core remaining close to 1.5%YoY, so having little implication for central bank policy which we see as on hold all year.

Australian retail sales likely expanded by only 0.2%MoM in March. That would still deliver 0.7%QoQ retail sales growth in 1Q18, though in real terms, that probably means something closer to 0.3/0.4% QoQ - so not pointing towards rampant consumer strength in the quarter, though not pointing towards capitulation either - the RBA looks likely on hold for the foreseeable future.

## Author

### Robert Carnell

Regional Head of Research, Asia-Pacific

[robert.carnell@asia.ing.com](mailto:robert.carnell@asia.ing.com)

# Indonesia: GDP growth mildly disappoints in 1Q18

Household and business spending remained healthy, but government spending and net exports growth rates slowed. BI is likely to consider measured tightening to support household spending



Source: Shutterstock

# 5.06%

1Q18 GDP growth rate

Unlikely to deter BI from measured tightening

Lower than expected

**GDP growth expected to mildly accelerate for the rest of the year, which would not necessarily derail a 2Q BI policy rate hike**

Economic activity continues at a pace seen in the past four years of around 5% YoY growth. Household spending grew at a steady pace while business spending accelerated to 8% from the 5% YoY increase in 1Q17. Government spending growth slowed to 2.3% from the year-ago growth of 2.7%. Net export growth slowed dramatically due to high base effects. Import growth accelerated in 1Q18 but exports slowed. We expect net exports in the coming quarters to remain

as a drag to overall economic activity largely due to base effects and rising imports. We need to see government spending growth mildly accelerate, especially in 4Q ahead of the presidential elections in April 2019. Leeway for higher deficit spending, however, would be limited as oil price and IDR assumptions for this year's fiscal budget were quite optimistic. We expect subsidies to be revised higher by mid-year and raise the fiscal deficit closer to 2.7% of GDP. This would help sustain a relatively strong household sector. Add to this efforts to contain inflation pressures. A rate hike as early as the 17 May meeting or by June would enhance such efforts through a support for IDR. IDR has slipped by almost 3% YTD. A persistently weak IDR at around the current level would see an average weakness of more than 4% this year, which is also weaker than this year's fiscal assumption. We revise our full year growth forecast from 5.4% to 5.2%. The revised forecast considers measured monetary tightening, improved household and business spending, more manageable import growth and limited fiscal deficit spending.

## Author

### **Alissa Lefebre**

Economist

[alissa.lefebvre@ing.com](mailto:alissa.lefebvre@ing.com)

### **Deepali Bhargava**

Regional Head of Research, Asia-Pacific

[Deepali.Bhargava@ing.com](mailto:Deepali.Bhargava@ing.com)

### **Ruben Dewitte**

Economist

+32495364780

[ruben.dewitte@ing.com](mailto:ruben.dewitte@ing.com)

### **Kinga Havasi**

Economic research trainee

[kinga.havasi@ing.com](mailto:kinga.havasi@ing.com)

### **Marten van Garderen**

Consumer Economist, Netherlands

[marten.van.garderen@ing.com](mailto:marten.van.garderen@ing.com)

### **David Havrlant**

Chief Economist, Czech Republic

420 770 321 486

[david.havrlant@ing.com](mailto:david.havrlant@ing.com)

### **Sander Burgers**

Senior Economist, Dutch Housing

[sander.burgers@ing.com](mailto:sander.burgers@ing.com)

### **Lynn Song**

Chief Economist, Greater China

[lynn.song@asia.ing.com](mailto:lynn.song@asia.ing.com)

**Michiel Tukker**

Senior European Rates Strategist

[michiel.tukker@ing.com](mailto:michiel.tukker@ing.com)

**Michal Rubaszek**

Senior Economist, Poland

[michal.rubaszek@ing.pl](mailto:michal.rubaszek@ing.pl)

**This is a test author**

**Stefan Posea**

Economist, Romania

[tiberiu-stefan.posea@ing.com](mailto:tiberiu-stefan.posea@ing.com)

**Marine Leleux**

Sector Strategist, Financials

[marine.leleux2@ing.com](mailto:marine.leleux2@ing.com)

**Jesse Norcross**

Senior Sector Strategist, Real Estate

[jesse.norcross@ing.com](mailto:jesse.norcross@ing.com)

**Teise Stellema**

Research Assistant, Energy Transition

[teise.stellema@ing.com](mailto:teise.stellema@ing.com)

**Diederik Stadig**

Sector Economist, TMT & Healthcare

[diederik.stadig@ing.com](mailto:diederik.stadig@ing.com)

**Diogo Gouveia**

Sector Economist

[diogo.duarte.vieira.de.gouveia@ing.com](mailto:diogo.duarte.vieira.de.gouveia@ing.com)

**Marine Leleux**

Sector Strategist, Financials

[marine.leleux2@ing.com](mailto:marine.leleux2@ing.com)

**Ewa Manthey**

Commodities Strategist

[ewa.manthey@ing.com](mailto:ewa.manthey@ing.com)

**ING Analysts**

**James Wilson**

EM Sovereign Strategist

[James.wilson@ing.com](mailto:James.wilson@ing.com)

**Sophie Smith**

Digital Editor

[sophie.smith@ing.com](mailto:sophie.smith@ing.com)

**Frantisek Taborsky**

EMEA FX & FI Strategist

[frantisek.taborsky@ing.com](mailto:frantisek.taborsky@ing.com)

**Adam Antoniak**

Senior Economist, Poland

[adam.antoniak@ing.pl](mailto:adam.antoniak@ing.pl)

**Min Joo Kang**

Senior Economist, South Korea and Japan

[min.joo.kang@asia.ing.com](mailto:min.joo.kang@asia.ing.com)

**Coco Zhang**

ESG Research

[coco.zhang@ing.com](mailto:coco.zhang@ing.com)

**Jan Frederik Slijkerman**

Senior Sector Strategist, TMT

[jan.frederik.slijkerman@ing.com](mailto:jan.frederik.slijkerman@ing.com)

**Katinka Jongkind**

Senior Economist, Services and Leisure

[Katinka.Jongkind@ing.com](mailto:Katinka.Jongkind@ing.com)

**Marina Le Blanc**

Sector Strategist, Financials

[Marina.Le.Blanc@ing.com](mailto:Marina.Le.Blanc@ing.com)

**Samuel Abettan**

Junior Economist

[samuel.abettan@ing.com](mailto:samuel.abettan@ing.com)

**Franziska Biehl**

Economist, Germany

[Franziska.Marie.Biehl@ing.de](mailto:Franziska.Marie.Biehl@ing.de)

**Rebecca Byrne**

Senior Editor and Supervisory Analyst

[rebecca.byrne@ing.com](mailto:rebecca.byrne@ing.com)

**Mirjam Bani**

Sector Economist, Commercial Real Estate & Public Sector (Netherlands)

[mirjam.bani@ing.com](mailto:mirjam.bani@ing.com)

**Timothy Rahill**

Credit Strategist

[timothy.rahill@ing.com](mailto:timothy.rahill@ing.com)

**Leszek Kasek**

Senior Economist, Poland

[leszek.kasek@ing.pl](mailto:leszek.kasek@ing.pl)

**Oleksiy Soroka, CFA**

Senior High Yield Credit Strategist

[oleksiy.soroka@ing.com](mailto:oleksiy.soroka@ing.com)

**Antoine Bouvet**

Head of European Rates Strategy

[antoine.bouvet@ing.com](mailto:antoine.bouvet@ing.com)

**Jeroen van den Broek**

Global Head of Sector Research

[jeroen.van.den.broek@ing.com](mailto:jeroen.van.den.broek@ing.com)

**Edse Dantuma**

Senior Sector Economist, Industry and Healthcare

[edse.dantuma@ing.com](mailto:edse.dantuma@ing.com)

**Francesco Pesole**

FX Strategist

[francesco.pesole@ing.com](mailto:francesco.pesole@ing.com)

**Rico Luman**

Senior Sector Economist, Transport and Logistics

[Rico.Luman@ing.com](mailto:Rico.Luman@ing.com)

**Jurjen Witteveen**

Sector Economist

[jurjen.witteveen@ing.com](mailto:jurjen.witteveen@ing.com)

**Dmitry Dolgin**

Chief Economist, CIS

[dmitry.dolgin@ing.de](mailto:dmitry.dolgin@ing.de)

**Nicholas Mapa**

Senior Economist, Philippines

[nicholas.antonio.mapa@asia.ing.com](mailto:nicholas.antonio.mapa@asia.ing.com)

**Egor Fedorov**

Senior Credit Analyst



[egor.fedorov@ing.com](mailto:egor.fedorov@ing.com)

**Sebastian Franke**

Consumer Economist

[sebastian.franke@ing.de](mailto:sebastian.franke@ing.de)

**Gerben Hieminga**

Senior Sector Economist, Energy

[gerben.hieminga@ing.com](mailto:gerben.hieminga@ing.com)

**Nadège Tillier**

Head of Corporates Sector Strategy

[nadege.tillier@ing.com](mailto:nadege.tillier@ing.com)

**Charlotte de Montpellier**

Senior Economist, France and Switzerland

[charlotte.de.montpellier@ing.com](mailto:charlotte.de.montpellier@ing.com)

**Laura Straeter**

Behavioural Scientist

+31(0)611172684

[laura.Straeter@ing.com](mailto:laura.Straeter@ing.com)

**Valentin Tataru**

Chief Economist, Romania

[valentin.tataru@ing.com](mailto:valentin.tataru@ing.com)

**James Smith**

Developed Markets Economist, UK

[james.smith@ing.com](mailto:james.smith@ing.com)

**Suvi Platerink Kosonen**

Senior Sector Strategist, Financials

[suvi.platerink-kosonen@ing.com](mailto:suvi.platerink-kosonen@ing.com)

**Thijs Geijer**

Senior Sector Economist, Food & Agri

[thijs.geijer@ing.com](mailto:thijs.geijer@ing.com)

**Maurice van Sante**

Senior Economist Construction & Team Lead Sectors

[maurice.van.sante@ing.com](mailto:maurice.van.sante@ing.com)

**Marcel Klok**

Senior Economist, Netherlands

[marcel.klok@ing.com](mailto:marcel.klok@ing.com)

**Piotr Poplawski**

Senior Economist, Poland

[piotr.poplawski@ing.pl](mailto:piotr.poplawski@ing.pl)

**Paolo Pizzoli**

Senior Economist, Italy, Greece

[paolo.pizzoli@ing.com](mailto:paolo.pizzoli@ing.com)

**Marieke Blom**

Chief Economist and Global Head of Research

[marieke.blom@ing.com](mailto:marieke.blom@ing.com)

**Raoul Leering**

Senior Macro Economist

[raoul.leering@ing.com](mailto:raoul.leering@ing.com)

**Maarten Leen**

Head of Global IFRS9 ME Scenarios

[maarten.leen@ing.com](mailto:maarten.leen@ing.com)

**Maureen Schuller**

Head of Financials Sector Strategy

[Maureen.Schuller@ing.com](mailto:Maureen.Schuller@ing.com)

**Warren Patterson**

Head of Commodities Strategy

[Warren.Patterson@asia.ing.com](mailto:Warren.Patterson@asia.ing.com)

**Rafal Benecki**

Chief Economist, Poland

[rafal.benecki@ing.pl](mailto:rafal.benecki@ing.pl)

**Philippe Ledent**

Senior Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg

[philippe.ledent@ing.com](mailto:philippe.ledent@ing.com)

**Peter Virovacz**

Senior Economist, Hungary

[peter.virovacz@ing.com](mailto:peter.virovacz@ing.com)

**Inga Fechner**

Senior Economist, Germany, Global Trade

[inga.fechner@ing.de](mailto:inga.fechner@ing.de)

**Dimitry Fleming**

Senior Data Analyst, Netherlands

[Dimitry.Fleming@ing.com](mailto:Dimitry.Fleming@ing.com)

**Ciprian Dascalu**

Chief Economist, Romania  
+40 31 406 8990  
[ciprian.dascalu@ing.com](mailto:ciprian.dascalu@ing.com)

**Muhammet Mercan**  
Chief Economist, Turkey  
[muhammet.mercan@ingbank.com.tr](mailto:muhammet.mercan@ingbank.com.tr)

**Iris Pang**  
Chief Economist, Greater China  
[iris.pang@asia.ing.com](mailto:iris.pang@asia.ing.com)

**Sophie Freeman**  
Writer, Group Research  
+44 20 7767 6209  
[Sophie.Freeman@uk.ing.com](mailto:Sophie.Freeman@uk.ing.com)

**Padhraic Garvey, CFA**  
Regional Head of Research, Americas  
[padhraic.garvey@ing.com](mailto:padhraic.garvey@ing.com)

**James Knightley**  
Chief International Economist, US  
[james.knightley@ing.com](mailto:james.knightley@ing.com)

**Tim Condon**  
Asia Chief Economist  
+65 6232-6020

**Martin van Vliet**  
Senior Interest Rate Strategist  
+31 20 563 8801  
[martin.van.vliet@ing.com](mailto:martin.van.vliet@ing.com)

**Robert Carnell**  
Regional Head of Research, Asia-Pacific  
[robert.carnell@asia.ing.com](mailto:robert.carnell@asia.ing.com)

**Karol Pogorzelski**  
Senior Economist, Poland  
[Karol.Pogorzelski@ing.pl](mailto:Karol.Pogorzelski@ing.pl)

**Carsten Brzeski**  
Global Head of Macro  
[carsten.brzeski@ing.de](mailto:carsten.brzeski@ing.de)

**Viraj Patel**  
Foreign Exchange Strategist

+44 20 7767 6405  
[viraj.patel@ing.com](mailto:viraj.patel@ing.com)

**Owen Thomas**  
Global Head of Editorial Content  
+44 (0) 207 767 5331  
[owen.thomas@ing.com](mailto:owen.thomas@ing.com)

**Bert Colijn**  
Chief Economist, Netherlands  
[bert.colijn@ing.com](mailto:bert.colijn@ing.com)

**Peter Vanden Houte**  
Chief Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg, Eurozone  
[peter.vandenhoute@ing.com](mailto:peter.vandenhoute@ing.com)

**Benjamin Schroeder**  
Senior Rates Strategist  
[benjamin.schroeder@ing.com](mailto:benjamin.schroeder@ing.com)

**Chris Turner**  
Global Head of Markets and Regional Head of Research for UK & CEE  
[chris.turner@ing.com](mailto:chris.turner@ing.com)

**Gustavo Rangel**  
Chief Economist, LATAM  
+1 646 424 6464  
[gustavo.rangel@ing.com](mailto:gustavo.rangel@ing.com)

**Carlo Cocuzzo**  
Economist, Digital Finance  
+44 20 7767 5306  
[carlo.cocuzzo@ing.com](mailto:carlo.cocuzzo@ing.com)

# Taiwan import slackness reveals long-term export weakness

Taiwan is importing less equipment for semiconductors. This could be a signal for slower export growth for the longer term future



Source: istock

## Export and import growth lower than expected

Exports in April grew 10% YoY, lower than the previous month's 16.7% and our estimate of 17.3% YoY. Similarly, imports grew 4.9% YoY, lower than the previous month's 10.4% and our estimate of 7.8%.

Looking at the details, we find that the short-term outlook for Taiwan trade is still fine, but not so for longer term growth. It could be that businesses have already planned for softer growth of trade ahead of Mainland China-US trade talks.

Moreover, the recent inconclusive trade talks could result in shifts in business strategies of the electronic sectors and related supply chain. Trade volume would also change accordingly.

### 1 Almost all export goods show a monthly fall

The first hint comes from the fact that exports fell on a monthly basis (-5.9% MoM) from electronic parts, and audiovisual products to machinery.

## Imports hint exports should grow in a couple of months ...

Looking at imports, we found that imports experienced a similar situation to exports as almost all goods fell in April from March.

Not everything is bad news. Electronic parts imports grew 24% YoY, which indicates exports of electronic products in the coming quarter should still experience strong growth.

### 3 ... but not the long term

However, there was a 5.1% YoY fall in equipment imports in the January to April period. Businesses may need to prepare for a disruption in the supply chain if there were a trade war between Mainland China and the US. The result could be expanding factories in other emerging economies as well as preparing for softer growth in export volumes.

### Outlook for the Taiwan economy under review

As trade tensions between Mainland China and the US escalates, Taiwan's export-oriented economy would be affected, especially when the tension is related to Mainland China's strategy of 'Made in China 2025'. We are putting the Taiwan outlook under review.

We may need to cut our GDP growth forecast, which is currently at 3.2% for 2018, and may also need to revise our USDTWD forecast further from 29.00 by the end of 2018 if coming data show continuous weakness in the economy.

### Author

#### Iris Pang

Chief Economist, Greater China

[iris.pang@asia.ing.com](mailto:iris.pang@asia.ing.com)

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