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Offshore Renminbi – New dynamics at play

- We add an RGI parameter that captures rising foreign access to onshore markets by tracking holdings
- This new dimension of Renminbi internationalisation supported the RGI rebound in July
- CNY could stay strong ahead of the 19th Party Congress; Dim Sum bond market is set to shrink further

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Introducing a new RGI parameter

We add a fifth index parameter[^] – foreign holdings of onshore assets – to the *Standard Chartered Renminbi Globalisation Index* (RGI), the first addition since its 2012 launch. With the new parameter, the RGI is no longer just a measure of offshore Renminbi (CNH) activity across key offshore centres, but also of foreign investors' growing access to China's onshore markets. Onshore market liberalisation has become China's preferred way of promoting Renminbi internationalisation lately, as more investor inflows are needed to offset capital outflows. Initiatives like the Stock Connect and China Interbank Bond Market (CIBM) programmes have yet to boost CNH activity, but they are necessary channels for the continued international ascent of the Chinese yuan (CNY). Tracking foreign investors' holdings via such channels should make the RGI even more representative.

Foreign holdings of onshore assets are on the rise, boosted most recently by the launch of the Bond Connect programme on 1 July. The RGI rose to 1,721 in July from a revised 1,659 in June (Figure 1). Of the 3.7% m/m headline increase – the biggest in almost two years – the new parameter contributed 0.45ppt, the fifth straight month of positive contributions. The bulk of the m/m improvement in July, however, came from cross-border payments and CNH FX turnover (Figure 2). We expect CNH activity (outside of the still-shrinking Dim Sum bond market) to stabilise further in the short term, as the CNY is likely to stay well supported ahead of the 19th Party Congress in mid-October.

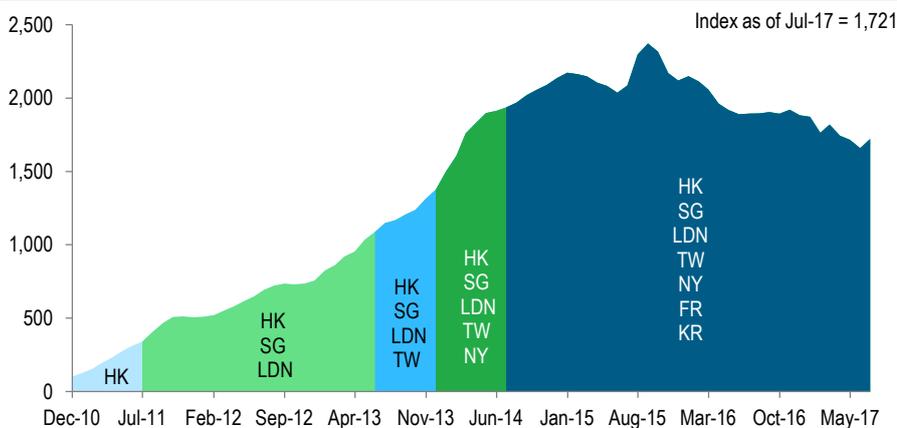
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Figure 1: RGI rose 3.7% m/m in July after shrinking c.9% in Q2



Note: RGI (Bloomberg: SCGRRI <Index>) is a comprehensive index that tracks CNH internationalisation across markets and geographies; our interactive data visualisation tool enables exploration of the evolution of the sub-components: <https://www.sc.com/BeyondBorders/infographics/rgi-tracker>; Source: Standard Chartered Research

[^] The four existing RGI parameters are: (1) CNH deposits, (2) cross-border CNY payments, (3) Dim Sum bonds and certificates of deposit (CDs) outstanding, and (4) CNH FX turnover

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RGI now tracks foreign holdings of onshore assets

Adding a new parameter to the model

Model revamp captures a new dimension of Renminbi internationalisation

For the new parameter, we primarily use the 'domestic Renminbi financial assets held by overseas entity' data series published by the People's Bank of China (PBoC), which encompasses equities, bonds, loans and deposits. We also use data from China Central Depository & Clearing (CCDC) and Shanghai Clearing House (SHC) for more timely estimates. The aim is to capture this growing dimension of CNY international usage as the massive foreign investor base – which is still largely under-invested in China onshore assets – gains greater market access over time. In line with the other RGI components, a three-month moving average is applied and the weight of foreign holdings of onshore assets is inversely proportional to its variance.

Contributing positively to internationalisation

New parameter shows improving overseas investor interest in onshore assets

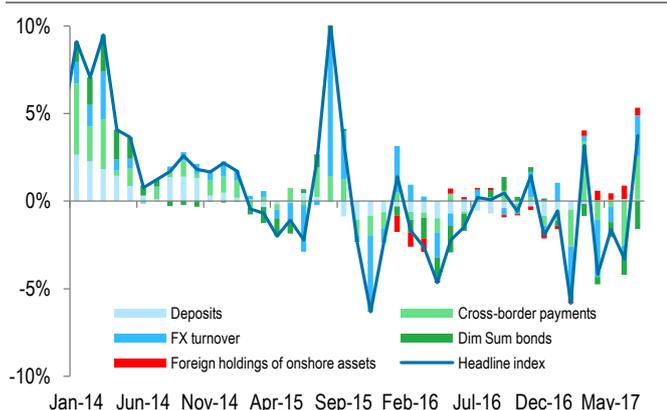
Figure 3 shows the impact of the methodology change on the index's performance. We have added the new parameter retroactively starting from January 2016 – after the market had stabilised following the shock of the August 2015 FX daily fixing reform, and before the launch of the CIBM programme in February 2016. The new RGI underperformed the old model for much of 2016 – foreign investors' appetite for China assets was not immune to Renminbi depreciation, or to the sell-off in the onshore bond market in Q4, when monetary conditions started to tighten to defend the currency from Fed hikes and to promote domestic deleveraging.

Against this backdrop, the YTD outperformance of the revamped RGI is even more encouraging, reflecting a genuine return of investor interest. Figure 4 shows foreign holdings of onshore bonds as reported by CCDC and SHC – up more than 10% in the first seven months of 2017. Onshore equities held by overseas entities rose an even stronger 34% between end-2016 and June 2017, according to PBoC data. Northbound investment flows have contributed positively to the headline RGI for five straight months.

More diverse and balanced flows are needed

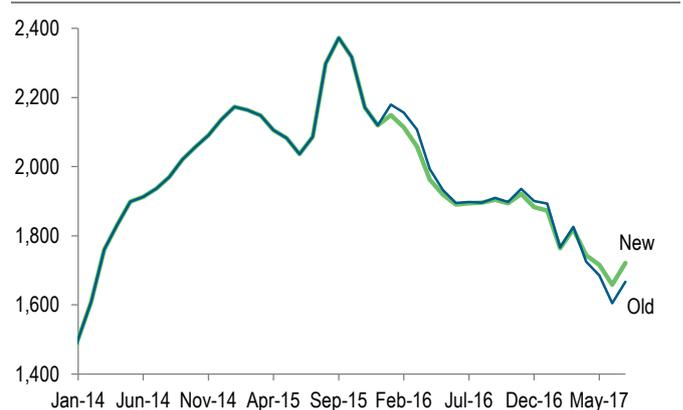
However, the new component alone is unlikely to be enough to reverse the RGI downtrend that began in Q3-2015. That would also require (1) persistent CNY stability to underpin the still-fragile recovery in CNH sentiment; and (2) a reversal of capital controls now that depreciation expectations and outflow pressure have dissipated. The latter is particularly important to reviving two-way cross-border flows and lifting CNH usage sustainably, in our view.

Figure 2: Positive contribution from the new parameter
Contributions of RGI components to % m/m change



Source: Standard Chartered Research

Figure 3: Revising the RGI retroactively to Jan-2016
Headline RGI with and without the new parameter



Source: Standard Chartered Research

We see more uncertainty on the horizon, capping any RGI rebound in the coming months

We believe it is still too early to call the bottoming out of the RGI. First, it remains to be seen whether the prevailing CNY strength can be sustained after the 19th Party Congress. Second, even without depreciation headwinds, some proxies for genuine CNY usage by corporates remain disappointing. For example, Renminbi-denominated goods trade fell to 10.3% of China's total goods trade in July, a 46-month low, reflecting a slow pick-up in CNY despite the recovery in broader economic activity (Figure 5). Third, we think the rebound in CNH deposits will be limited without fresh southbound flows to replenish offshore liquidity. Recent softness in CNH HIBOR has been primarily a function of weak CNH demand.

The CNY has been strengthening not only against the USD, but also against the basket

CNY – PBoC mind tricks

After trading above the 6.8 level for most of H1-2017, USD-CNY entered a markedly different dynamic in July and August, with spot retreating from 6.80 to below 6.50 in just two months. It is striking that the recent bout of USD weakness has seen CNY appreciation against both the USD and the basket. On a basket basis, the CNY effective exchange rate (EER) rose from a low of just above 92.00 at the end of May to above 95.00 in early September, a high for 2017 and a rise of close to 3.5% over three months.

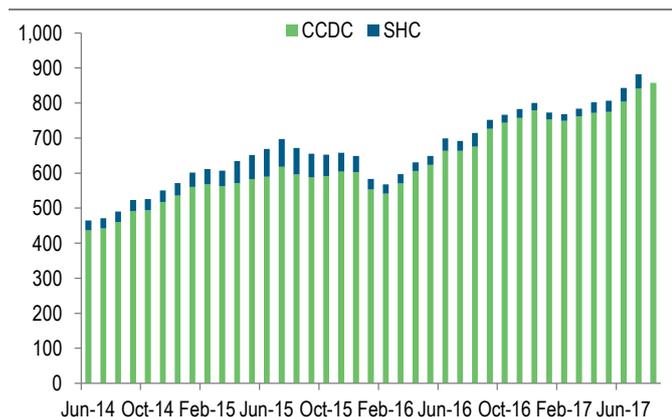
The CNY has benefited from increased corporate hedging and safe-haven flows

Two main factors have driven the recent bout of CNY strength. First, the weaker USD outlook continues to drive currency gains. Doubts over US policy and the future Fed outlook weigh on the USD. Second, policy considerations ahead of the 19th Party Congress may have supported recent CNY gains. This has led to increased corporate hedging, as well as safe-haven flows into the CNY as market players see the CNY as an 'island of stability' amid elevated geopolitical tensions on the Korean peninsula.

We do not see a fundamental economic need to persistently appreciate the CNY against the basket. As in the rest of EM Asia, China's growth/inflation mix does not decisively favour a stronger currency. Therefore, while the CNY can continue to strengthen against the USD under a weaker USD, its move against the basket appears to be a short-term bout of CNY strength, perhaps to achieve a policy goal around the 19th Party Congress (rather than an economic goal).

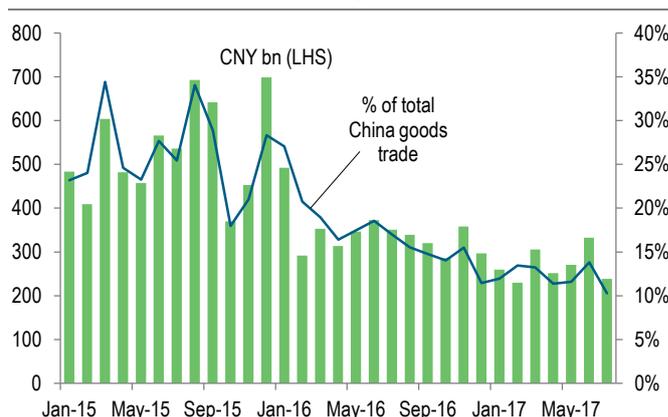
We believe the authorities remain focused on the basket level rather than on the outright level of USD-CNY. Therefore, in an environment of further USD weakness, it is possible for USD-CNY to move even lower in the near term. This would pose risks to our year-end forecast of 6.82 for USD-CNY.

Figure 4: Foreign holdings of onshore bonds
CCDC and SHC settled bonds, CNY bn



Source: Wind Info, Standard Chartered Research

Figure 5: Renminbi invoicing lags behind trade rebound
China's Renminbi-denominated goods trade



Source: CEIC, Standard Chartered Research



Dim sum bond market continues to shrink

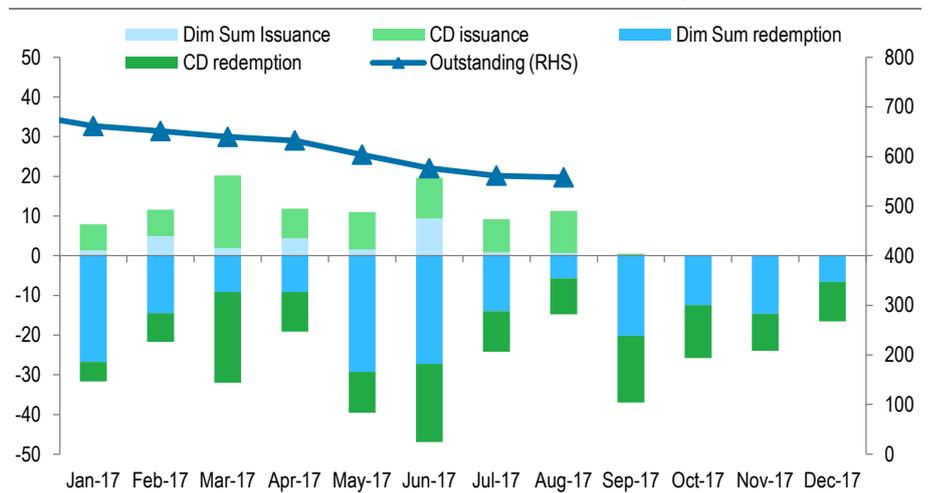
We expect the Dim Sum bond market to shrink further, despite strong demand near-term

Net issuance in the Dim Sum bond market remained negative in August, despite strong momentum for the Renminbi. Gross issuance stood at CNY 11.3bn; bond issuance slid to CNY 632mn, the lowest level since August 2013, while issuance of certificates of deposit (CDs) picked up slightly to CNY 10.6bn. Net issuance narrowed to -CNY 6bn from -CNY 15bn in July, and the outstanding market declined further to CNY 554bn as of end-August, down 19% YTD.

We expect demand for Dim Sum bonds to stay strong as re-investment needs rise in September. But the lack of primary issuance suggests that the bulk of secondary liquidity is in offshore China government bonds (CNH CGBs), which have been trading at only a small premium over onshore peers. Moreover, improved access to the domestic market and the availability of short-dated, high-yielding negotiable certificates of deposit (NCDs) in the domestic market are likely to drive diversification from the offshore market. For example, the 3M NCD in the onshore market is now issued at c.4.7%, higher than the 1Y CNH CD issuance rate of 4.0-4.3% in August.

As such, we expect net issuance to stay negative for the remainder of 2017, and expect the overall market to decline further to CNY 515-525bn by year-end.

Figure 6: Dim sum bond market down 19% YTD as of end-August
 Dim Sum bond and CD issuance, redemptions, and outstanding (CNY bn)



Source: Bloomberg, Standard Chartered Research



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