



Offshore Renminbi – A test of resilience

- RGI rebounded in March after brief dip in February; seems well positioned to face renewed trade headwinds
- We continue to see improvement in underlying Renminbi trade settlement and northbound investment
- China shows strong commitment to further opening up the economy, boding well for CNH usage growth

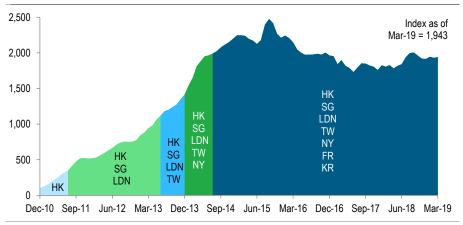


Good momentum heading into potentially choppier Q2

The Standard Chartered Renminbi Globalisation Index (RGI) – our proprietary measure of international Renminbi usage – rose to 1,943 in March from a revised 1,929 in January (Figure 1). The 0.7% m/m rebound recovered almost all lost ground in February, when Renminbi usage slowed around the Lunar New Year holidays. The rebound allowed RGI to end Q1-2019 on a higher note than end-2018 (1,914). As expected, RGI was driven higher mainly by cross-border payments in March, mirroring the strong pick-up in external trade (exports grew by 14.2%). Foreign holdings of onshore assets also increased materially, with equity holdings in particular growing 46% q/q in Q1, on index inclusion and a stabilising economy. Recent official comments, including Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the Belt and Road Forum, show continued commitment to further open up China's markets, encourage fair competition and protect foreign interests.

US-China trade friction has flared up again recently. Offshore Renminbi (CNH) activity is not immune to renewed risk aversion and higher CNY volatility, which was reflected in the near-5% drop in RGI in Q4-2018. However, Renminbi internationalisation quickly resumed its recovery as external headwinds subsided and the Chinese yuan (CNY) stabilised entering 2019. Cross-border payments survived a challenging Q4 without any major setback. Furthermore, the March RGI reading is more than 20% below the index's September 2015 peak, which implies much less room for another instance of major contraction in CNH activity.

Figure 1: The RGI rose 1.5% in Q1-2019 after correcting 4.5% in Q4-2018



Note: RGI (Bloomberg: SCGRRGI <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://research.sc.com/research/api/application/static/chart-packs/RGI; Source: Standard Chartered Research

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What drove RGI higher in Q1

Renminbi trade settlement continued to perform well

Renminbi trade settlement recovered for a third straight quarter in Q1 Cross-border payments (+1.10ppt) and foreign holdings of onshore assets (+0.44ppt) were key contributors to the 0.73% m/m increase in headline RGI in March (Figure 2). The increase in cross-border payments was not a surprise, as the February base was distorted by the slowdown in business activity around the Lunar New Year holidays. Encouragingly, Renminbi trade settlement – a key part of cross-border payments – continued to perform well, all things considered, as per the official data. Renminbi trade settlement eased marginally to 13.4% of all China goods trade in March, but this easing was from a 27-month high of 14.7% in February. The 13.7% average for Q1-2019, up from 12.0% and 12.4% in Q3- and Q4-2018, respectively, remains consistent with a healthy recovery story.

Northbound equity flows leading the latest charge

The 0.44ppt boost to headline RGI growth from the 'foreign holdings of onshore assets' component was the most in eight months and confirmation of an underlying improvement trend after a brief pause in Q4-2018. Further, the breakdown of this RGI component had a positive message – foreign holdings of onshore equities rose by a substantial CNY 532bn (+46%) in Q1. This eclipsed foreign holdings related to bonds (up USD 107bn, or +6%), which were the main driver of this RGI component for the bulk of 2018 (Figure 3). Receding China slowdown concerns and rising index inclusion prospects helped boost such northbound flows, which look to have carried over into the April base, based on the latest data from the Stock Connect schemes and China Central Depository and Clearing (CCDC). Specifically, inclusion of China bonds in the Bloomberg-Barclays Global Aggregate Index on 1 April should lead to monthly passive inflows of c.USD 6bn over the next 20 months.

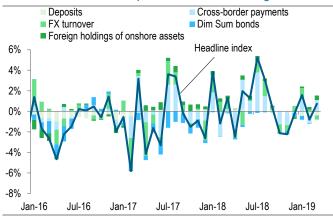
Strong commitment to continue opening up

China has consistently reiterated its commitment to opening up the economy further

President Xi Jinping recently reiterated China's commitment to further opening up its economy in his keynote speech at the Belt and Road Forum on 26 April. Xi outlined the following 'next steps' to reform and to move along US-China trade negotiations (at least until the recent impasse):

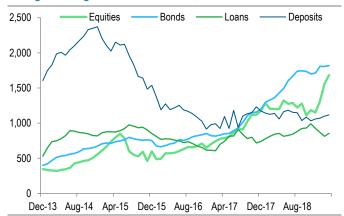
 Further expand market access – This includes embracing fair competition, materially shortening the 'negative list', and promoting the holistic opening of modern services, manufacturing and agricultural sectors. The plan includes

Figure 2: Wrapping up a good Q1-2019
Contributions of RGI components to % m/m change



Source: Standard Chartered Research

Figure 3: Strong equity inflows in Q1-2019
Foreign holdings of onshore assets, CNY bn



Source: CEIC, Standard Chartered Research



establishing more free trade experimentation zones and accelerating the exploration of the building of free trade ports. Xi also mentioned lowering the threshold for foreign ownership, which was backed up by the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission's announcement on upcoming new measures to further open the banking and insurance sectors.

- Increase intellectual property protection In another sign that China is
 pushing for a trade deal, Xi said there would be emphasis on improving the legal
 system for intellectual property protection, strengthening law enforcement,
 eliminating forced technology transfer and improving the protection of business
 secrets.
- 3. Increase imports of goods and services China further plans to reduce import tariffs and eliminate various non-tariff barriers. There was also an explicit commitment to not purposefully pursue a trade surplus. China would also be willing to import more foreign competitive high-quality agricultural goods, manufactured goods, and services in order to promote balanced global trade.
- 4. Strengthen international policy coordination Xi mentioned no competitive currency devaluation, saying that China would continue to improve the exchange rate formation mechanism and maintain the stability of the exchange rate at a reasonable and balanced level. Such reassurance is key in anchoring CNY expectations, especially with still-weak currency fundamentals (for example, no persistent trade surplus) and lingering trade negotiation headwinds, in our view.
- 5. **Take policy implementation seriously** Xi noted that China places a high value on fulfilling multilateral and bilateral economic and trade agreements, and on establishing a binding international agreement enforcement mechanism.

China places more emphasis on quality and sustainability of Belt and Road projects These comments stand against the larger backdrop of China demonstrating its commitment to expand the reach and scale of the Belt and Road initiative (BRI), stressing the pursuit of innovation, quality, multilateralism, transparency, social and environmental sustainability, and zero tolerance for corruption. There was also a strong call for the use of special loans, the Silk Road Fund and financing from multilateral agencies to support BRI projects – railways, roads and pipelines – to ease infrastructure bottlenecks that have constrained development in some countries.

We continue to see massive funding needs arising from such infrastructure projects (and other trade or investment projects), which should further boost the international use of the Renminbi over time. Beijing also addressed debt sustainability concerns through the release of non-mandatory guidelines for BRI participants, called the 'Debt Sustainability Framework for Participating Countries of the BRI'.



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Document is released at 03:59 GMT 08 May 2019