

# Vietnam Monitor (Issue 17)

Greater VND stability, a peak in  
inflation and lower VGB yields seen

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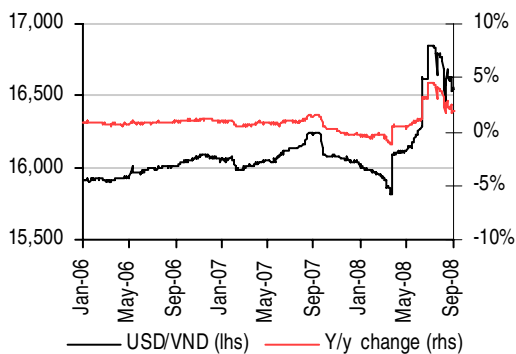
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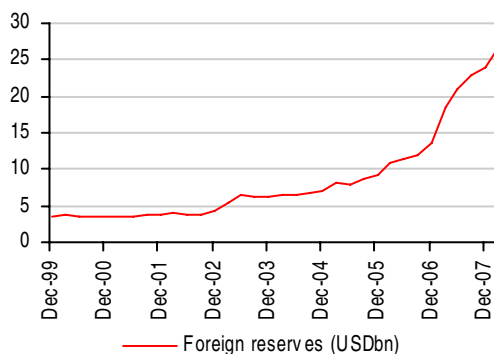
- ▶ **Economics:** Inflation should peak in September at around 29%. The debate on whether policy should be eased in Vietnam is somewhat redundant as lending rates have already been cut.
- ▶ **Equity Strategy:** After bouncing 47% off its low, the stock market will probably take a breather now. Valuations have got a bit stretched, at an historical PE of 15x.
- ▶ **Fixed Income Strategy:** VGB yields continue to decline on improving bank liquidity. Although further yield declines are possible, we do not recommend chasing the rally given negative real yields and a lack of FX hedging opportunities.
- ▶ **FX Strategy:** Better macro data and lower oil prices reinforce stability. Evidence of market-clearing within the trading band is also good news and may represent a significant development in exchange rate regime management.

USD/VND



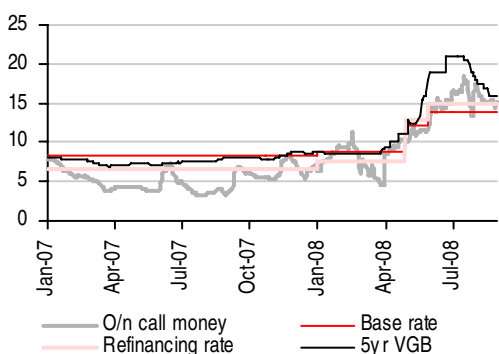
Source: Bloomberg

FX reserves



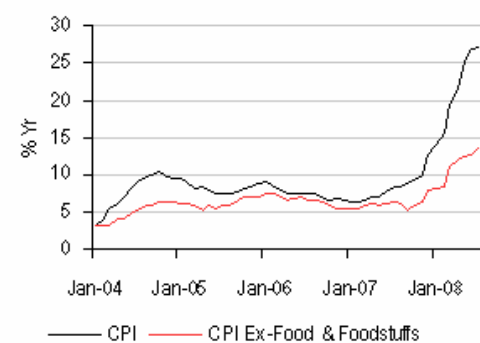
Source: CEIC, \*HSBC estimate for 1Q08

O/n call money, benchmark policy rates and 5yr bond yields



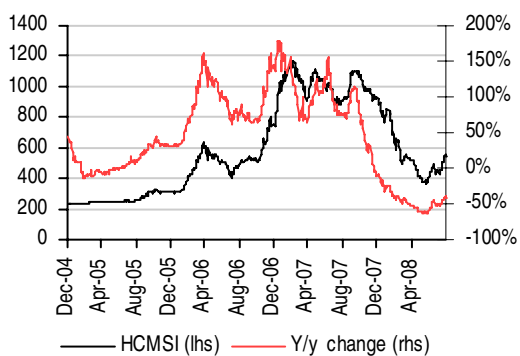
Source: Reuters, HSBC

Headline and ex-food CPI



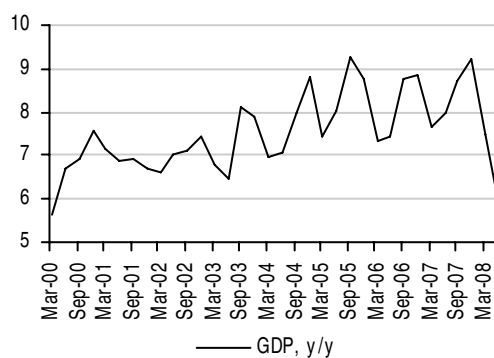
Source: CEIC, HSBC

HCMS Index



Source: Bloomberg

GDP growth



Source: CEIC

# Economics

- ▶ Inflation should peak in September at around 29%
- ▶ Trade deficit has stabilised, though oil balance has flipped into deficit
- ▶ The debate on whether policy should be eased in Vietnam is somewhat redundant as lending rates have already been cut

## Overview

Inflation touched a new high in August, boosted by the fuel price hike announced in July. Since then fuel prices have been cut by a cumulative 11% and rice prices have come down further. As such, we look for inflation to peak in September at around 29%, with our year-end target being 24%. Core inflation, however, is still accelerating.

The trade deficit has stabilised over the last three months at around USD800m. We thought it interesting to highlight two aspects of the trade deficit in this issue. First, domestic enterprises are the ones causing the trade deficit as foreign enterprises typically have a trade surplus; second, Vietnam's oil balance has flipped into deficit.

On the policy front there is much debate on whether Vietnam should ease policy and if yes, then when. In practice policy has been eased already, with lending rates having declined on moral suasion by the central bank.

## Inflation

### Fuel effects

Inflation in Vietnam accelerated to 28.3% y-o-y in August – yet another high – from 27% in July, with the numbers boosted by the 31% hike in fuel prices announced by Petrolimex on 21 July.

Subsequently, Petrolimex has cut petrol prices twice – by 5.3% effective from 14 August and again by 5.6% effective 27 August – with the most popular 92-octane gasoline currently selling at VND17,000<sup>1</sup> per litre. According to our calculations these price cuts should shave off roughly 0.4ppts from headline inflation in September.

### Month-on-month

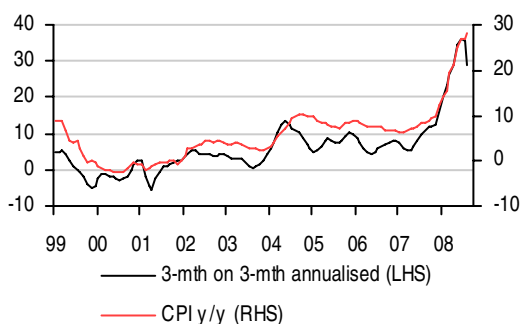
The market tends to pay close attention to the month-on-month change in inflation, which was 1.56% in August compared with 1.1% previously. However, we prefer to look at our in-house seasonally adjusted inflation series which rose by 1.9% m-o-m, up from 1.3% in July and well north of the decade average of the 0.5%. As the monthly number would have been boosted by the fuel price hike, we look at the 3-month on 3-month annualised rise in the seasonally adjusted series to get a better handle on the underlying trend. This peaked in June at about 36% and is currently running at 29% – the slowest pace in four months. As shown in chart 1, the 3-month on 3-month annualised change of the seasonally adjusted

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<sup>1</sup> This is however still 30% above the levels at the end of last year. Kerosene prices were also reduced by VND 1000 to VND 18000. Diesel prices however have been left unchanged at VND 15950.

series typically serves as a good lead indicator for year-on-year change in inflation.

### 1. Inflation close to peaking

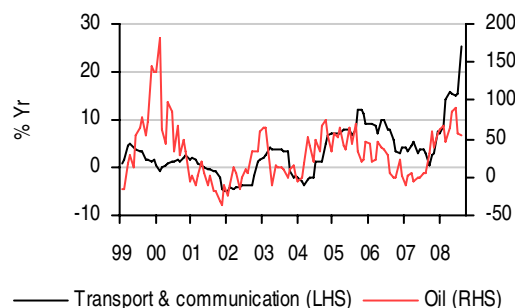


This fits in well with our view that the peak in inflation is around the corner – we think September at around 29%. After that we expect inflation to come off with our year-end target being 24%, as the impact of softer demand and lower commodity prices comes through. Additionally, base effects also become increasingly favourable going forward.

### Some details

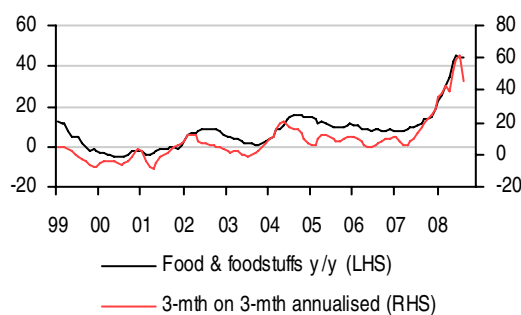
As can be expected, the fuel price hike saw the transportation and communications sub-index<sup>2</sup> spike higher, jumping by 10ppts to nearly 26% y-o-y in August – comfortably the highest in over a decade. With fuel prices being cut by a cumulative 11% over the last two weeks, we expect the transportation index to come off somewhat next month.

### 2. Transportation costs spiked higher



Food and foodstuffs inflation decelerated for the second consecutive month, printing at 44.2% y-o-y from a peak of 45.6% y-o-y in June. With domestic rice prices taking a breather, we expect food and foodstuffs inflation to soften further. The 3-month on 3-month annualised change in the seasonally adjusted food and foodstuffs series also suggests a further down move.

### 3. Food and foodstuffs inflation: peaked?



### Stubborn core

Core inflation, however, continues to accelerate, printing at a new high of 15.3% y-o-y in August, having started the year at 8.4%. Typically core inflation increases gradually and tends to be quite persistent. However, as can be seen in chart 4, core inflation has more than doubled from the levels seen at the end of 2007.

<sup>2</sup> As communication costs fell by 11% y-o-y in August, the entire up move is explained by the transportation component. Unfortunately the details for the transportation component are not available.

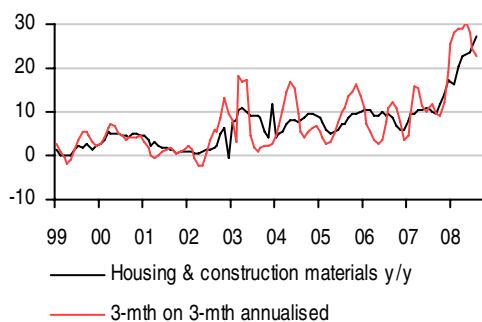
#### 4. Core inflation still heading higher



Source: HSBC

Here the main culprit is the housing and construction materials sub-index, which has a weight of 10% in the CPI basket. This is currently running at just above 27% y-o-y compared with around 10% y-o-y in the third quarter of 2007. With the construction industry slowing dramatically, one can expect some tempering in housing costs. The 3-month on 3-month annualised change in the seasonally adjusted housing and construction materials series also suggests the same.

#### 5. Housing and construction material costs to turn?

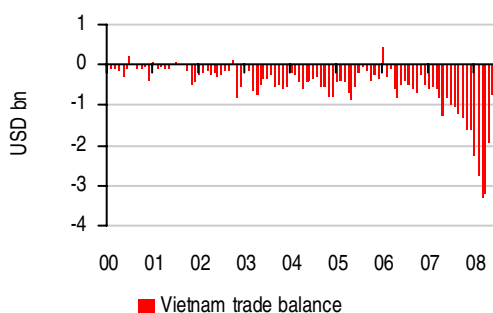


Source: CEIC, HSBC

## Trade deficit

The trade deficit seems to have stabilised over the last three months, with an average of around USD0.8bn per month. Year-to-date the deficit stands at USD16bn as of August compared with USD6.6bn in the same period last year.

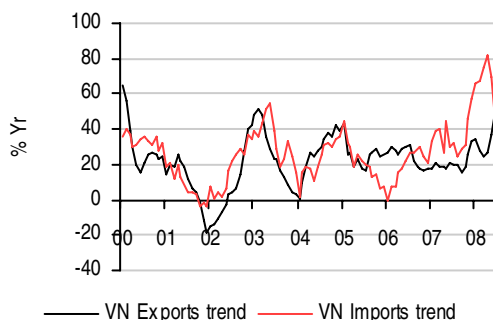
#### 6. Trade deficit seems to have stabilised...



Source: CEIC, HSBC

As highlighted in the previous issue of the *Vietnam Monitor*, the recent stabilisation is largely a function of a collapse in import value growth, with accelerating export values also chipping in.

#### 7. ...with import growth collapsing and exports holding up

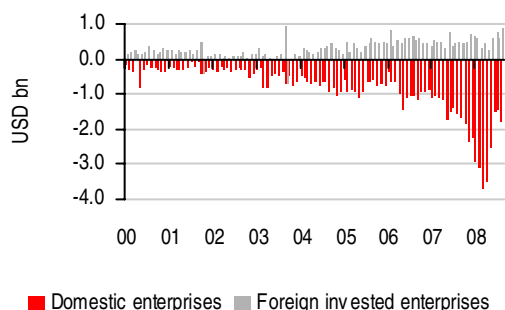


Source: HSBC

## Sector breakdown

What is perhaps interesting and seldom talked about is the breakdown of the trade deficit between domestic enterprises and foreign invested enterprises. Chart 8 shows the split for data going back to 2000 on a monthly frequency. As can be seen, the domestic enterprises always have a trade deficit whilst the foreign invested enterprises always have a trade surplus. This probably partly reflects the differing efficiency levels of the two sectors – much remains to be done in terms of technology transfer and better supply chain management for domestic firms, not to mention leakage on account of corruption.

8. Trade deficit: sectoral breakdown



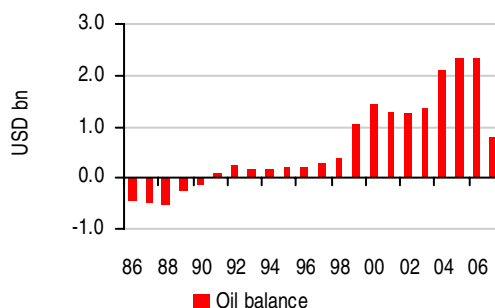
Needless to say, the overall trade deficit is being weighed down by the domestic enterprises with the foreign invested firms actually lessening the burden. Year-to-date, the domestic enterprises trade deficit stands at USD20.4bn – double the level for the same period last year. On the other hand, the trade surplus for the foreign invested enterprises stands at USD4.5bn y-t-d compared with USD3.9bn in the first eight months of 2007.

## Oil balance

Given the importance of oil in Vietnam's trade account – crude oil makes up 20% of exports and refined oil products makes up 15% of imports<sup>3</sup> – we thought it worthwhile to highlight the developments on the oil balance front. But first some quick background – chart 9 shows the annual oil balance going back to 1986. As can be seen, since the beginning of the 1990s the oil balance has been positive, averaging 2.7% of GDP over the period.

However, in 2007 the balance shrank dramatically. A large part of this is explained by declining oil export volumes, though the high crude oil price did provide some off-set. Additionally, imports rose quite rapidly, consistent with the overheating economy, and as

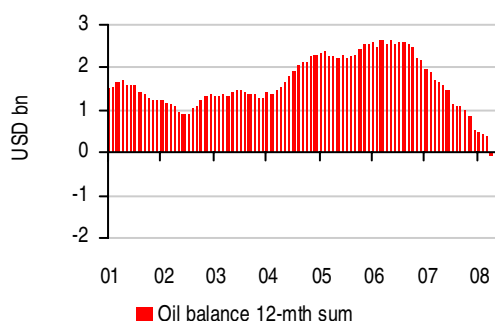
9. Annual oil balance



mentioned in the earlier section, the inefficiency of the domestic sector.

In the first eight months of 2008, crude oil exports have risen by an average 53% y-o-y – no doubt benefiting from the high crude oil price – compared with a fall of 11% y-o-y in the same period last year. Imports of refined petroleum have however increased by nearly 102% y-o-y on average versus 11% y-o-y in 2007. As monthly trade deficit numbers can be volatile, we look at the 12-month rolling sum of the oil balance as an indicator of underlying trend. As shown in chart 10, the oil balance has been on a declining trend since the beginning of 2007, flipping into a deficit in June 2008.

10. Oil balance on a declining trend



<sup>3</sup> Vietnam currently does not have any refining capacity and needs to import its entire refined oil requirement.

## Policy thoughts

The State Bank of Vietnam appears to be stuck between two government objectives: (1) to bring inflation down to single digits by the end of 2009 and (2) to support economic growth and help the government achieve its growth target of 7% for 2008.

Given these somewhat conflicting objectives, we are getting mixed signals from the central bank as well. On one hand, Governor Giau has made it very clear that compulsory reserves will not be lowered in a bid to clamp down on inflation. On the other hand, although the central bank has left the base rate unchanged at 14%, it has been encouraging banks to cut their lending rates to lessen the burden on businesses.

As highlighted in the last edition of the *Vietnam Monitor*, this moral suasion has seen most banks cut lending rates by 0.5-1ppt. So in some sense the debate on whether Vietnam should cut rates, and if yes, when, is redundant as the easing cycle on rates has already begun.

This has been followed by other SBV measures to reduce bank funding costs and improve liquidity (see the fixed-income section for further details), which has seen a number of banks announce further cuts in the lending rate. The Bank of Investment & Development of Vietnam (BIDV), the second largest lender by assets, said that it will cut lending interest rates by up to 0.8ppts to 18%.

As such BIDV will charge 20% to all customers for Dong loans down from 20.4%, while the lending rate to businesses dealing with oil products, steel, coal and cement would be 19% compared with 19.8% previously. For rice exporters such as Vinafood, BIDV will offer an 18% interest rate, down from 18.5%.

Vietcombank has announced that it will cut lending interest rates by 1.525% per year across the board, with clients in essential sectors

enjoying a 19.475% rate. Techcombank cut rates for the first time by 0.5-1ppts.

Separately, there is pressure on bank balance sheets, with a fair share of the banks seeing a rise in non-payment of loans. With economic growth expected to weaken further, the risk is that non-performing loans<sup>4</sup> will increase.

At the current time, according to SBV Deputy Governor Tran Minh Tuan, based on the principle of not allowing any bank to fall apart, the State Bank has been providing liquidity support to some of the weaker banks in the system. However, from next year onwards, the State Bank will allow market forces to work and poorly-performing institutions will have to be merged to create strength, suggesting that we may well get some consolidation in the banking industry.

Additionally, central bank officials also voiced their opinion that it is time for Vietnam to review its capital adequacy requirement. Currently Vietnam follows Basle I (8% CAR) while the popular international standard now is 12%.

### Prakriti Sofat

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<sup>4</sup> We do not have bank-wide NPL data for Vietnam. However, our onshore sources tell us that official NPLs for state-owned commercial banks are around 5%. If one were to apply international standards, then they are more in the range of 10%.

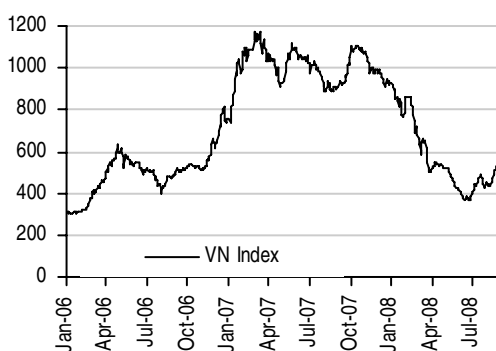
# Equity strategy

- ▶ After bouncing 47% off its low, the stock market will probably take a breather now
- ▶ Valuations have got a bit stretched, with an historical PE of 15x
- ▶ The outlook for earnings is unclear, with H1 net profit falling y-o-y

## No easy road ahead

The Vietnamese market has risen by 47% from its low on June 20. The main reason for the rebound was that investors began to feel that the government had finally begun to take the tough measures necessary to kill inflation and tackle the growing structural problems with the economy. The rebound was driven almost entirely by a recovery in domestic investor sentiment; foreign investors have been steady buyers throughout the year (Chart 2), and indeed were net sellers on a number of days in August as they took profits after the rally.

1. Vietnam stock index

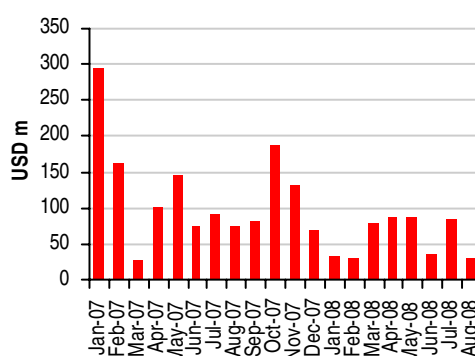


Source: Bloomberg

The rally has allowed other data for the market to improve too. Turnover has recovered sharply, to average USD70m a day during August, compared

to a low of less than USD20m a day during the worst of the slump in June. The size of the market has begun to expand again as well, with total market cap of the two exchanges back to USD19bn, compared to USD13bn a couple of months ago. There are now 14 stocks in what we would consider the foreigner investible universe (market cap of USD200m or higher, below foreign ownership limit) compared to 10 in July.

2. Foreign net buying of Vietnamese equities



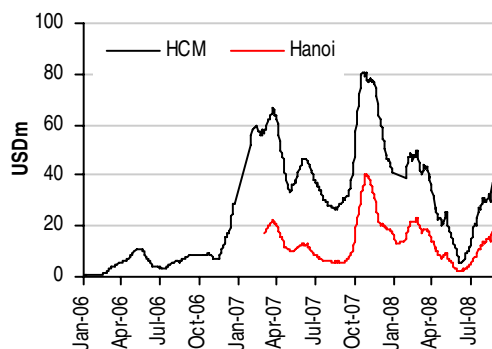
Source: Bloomberg (To Aug 21)

But the easy part has been done. Bargain-hunters have pulled the market up from its oversold position in June. The going for the market will get harder from now on.

For one, the government has to continue to show its commitment to prudent macroeconomic policies. The hasty move to cut fuel prices by 5%

in August after crude oil fell, and suggestions that the State Bank will be able to lower interest rates again within a few months question whether this is likely. Further postponements to the privatisation programme for large state-owned companies (the media reports that IPOs for blue-chips such as BIDV, Mobifone and Vietnam Airlines will not be attempted before next year, despite the stronger stock market) are also disappointing. Our view remains that a well-planned and cautiously-priced string of privatisation IPOs would stimulate the market rather than swamp demand.

3. Daily trading value on HCM and Hanoi exchanges (20DMA)

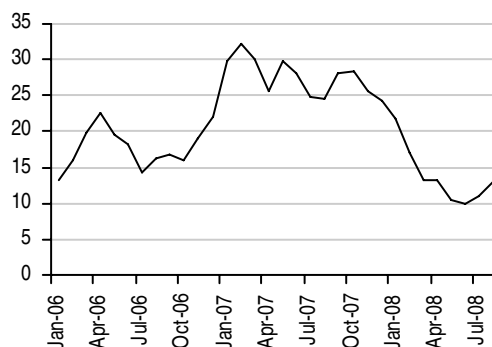


Source: Bloomberg

The second problem is that valuations have become somewhat stretched after the recent run-up in shares. The Ho Chi Minh market now trades on 15x last year's earnings. If we assume 10% growth for this year and next (we discuss below whether we are correct to do so), this amounts to a 12-month forward PE of 13.5x (Chart 4) – somewhat higher than other regional multiples currently (China H-shares are on 11.5x and MSCI Asia ex Japan on 11.6x).

Indeed, the foreign profit-taking recently (including the IFC selling 6.2% of its 7% holding in Asia Commercial Bank) probably reflects the fact that the market has got a little too expensive in the short term.

4. Estimated 12-month forward PE for VN Index



Source: HSBC

### Polarised earnings

But the real level of valuation is very hard to calculate given uncertainties about the outlook for corporate earnings. First-half earnings, all of which have now been announced, were a very mixed bag. Overall, for the large-cap stocks in our universe (those shown in Table 5), sales rose by 64% and operating profit by 37%, but net profit declined by 15%. A number of companies took extraordinary write-offs to reflect the fall in the value of stock holdings in real estate.

As Table 5 shows, this is reflected in individual companies' results. Those with losses (such as Saigon Securities) or large profit falls generally took such extraordinary write-downs. However, quarterly earnings are not audited in Vietnam and many companies will choose not to write off book losses until the full-year results. This means that for the year as a whole, earnings for the market may decline sharply, perhaps by as much as 30-40%. Those, however, should be one-offs and, with underlying operating earnings continuing to grow robustly, net profit would be expected to rebound sharply next year.

## 5. First half earnings growth y-o-y for large companies

Code	Company	H1 Basis
DPM	PETROVIETNAM FERT & CHEMICAL	97% PBT
ACB	ASIA COMMERCIAL BANK	14% PBT
VNM	VIET NAM DAIRY PRODUCTS JSC	21% NP
HPG	HOA PHAT GROUP JSC	351% NP
PVD	PETROVIETNAM DRILLING AND WE	134% PBT
STB	SAIGON THUONG TIN COMMERCIAL	23% PBT
VIC	VINCOM JSC	13% PBT
KBC	KINHBAC CITY DEVELOPMENT SHA	n/a
PPC	PHA LAI THERMAL POWER	4% NP
VPL	VINPEARL JSC	-62% PBT
FPT	CORP FOR FINANCING AND PROMO	25% PBT
ITA	TAN TAO INDUSTRIAL PARK CORP	35% NP
SSI	SAIGON SECURITIES INC	-170% NP
PVS	PETROLEUM TECHNICAL SERVICES	n/a
VSH	VINH SON - SONG HINH HYDROPO	151% NP
KDC	KINHDO CORPORATION	-36%
SJS	SONGDA URBAN & INDUSTRIAL ZO	-97% NP
PVI	PETROVIETNAM INSURANCE JSC	30% PBT
ANV	NAM VIET CORP	-19% PBT

Source: Bloomberg

Hence we keep what we see as a fairly conservative assumption of 10% CAGR for 2008-9. But the lack of transparency in earnings could worry the market and make it hard for investors to judge whether Vietnamese stocks in general and individual companies in particular represent good value at the current level of stock prices.

## Roller-coaster ride

In this environment, we think the market needs to pause for breath for a while. We continue to like the long-term fundamentals in Vietnam, and stick with a small non-benchmark recommended weight in our portfolio. But this will continue to be a market where investors should expect a roller-coaster ride and, after the sharp upswing of the past two months, a correction can not be ruled out for the next few weeks.

## 6. Key stock market data

	HCM	Hanoi	Total
Market cap (USDm)	14,296	4,538	18,833
No. of stocks	156	146	302
Stocks with mkt cap >USD1bn	2	1	3
Stocks with mkt cap >USD500m	10	2	12
Stocks with mkt cap >USD200m	15	4	19
Stocks that hit foreign limit	3	2	5
Daily turnover (USDm, 1mth ave)	37	18	55
Foreign ownership	26.6%	16.2%	24.1%
PE (2007) x	15.0	14.2	
ROE	22.9%	17.2%	22.8%

Source: HSBC, Bloomberg, HOSE

## Garry Evans

## 7. Key valuation data for the largest listed Vietnamese stocks (market cap >USD200m)

Code	Name	Industry Subgroup	Exchange	Mkt cap (USDm)	Ave daily t/over (USDm)	Foreign ownership	Foreign limit	Room for foreign buying (USDm)	PE	Chg 3M
DPM	PETROVIETNAM FERT & CHEMICAL	Chemicals-Diversified	HCM	1,519	3.21	18%	49%	472	19.0	53%
ACB	ASIA COMMERCIAL BANK	Commer Banks Non-US	Hanoi	1,345	2.70	30%	30%	0	10.5	52%
VNM	VIET NAM DAIRY PRODUCTS JSC	Food-Dairy Products	HCM	1,235	0.78	46%	46%	2	20.9	3%
HPG	HOA PHAT GROUP JSC	Miscellaneous Manufactur	HCM	916	1.85	25%	49%	222	20.6	101%
PVD	PETROVIETNAM DRILLING AND WE	Oil-Field Services	HCM	915	0.93	30%	49%	172	31.4	48%
STB	SAIGON THUONG TIN COMMERCIAL	Commer Banks Non-US	HCM	897	2.52	30%	30%	0	10.4	29%
VIC	VINCOM JSC	Real Estate Oper/Develop	HCM	783	0.64	5%	49%	342	37.8	51%
KBC	KINHBAC CITY DEVELOPMENT SHA	Bldg-Residential/Commer	Hanoi	783	0.26	14%	49%	271	31.6	-18%
PPC	PHA LAI THERMAL POWER	Electric-Generation	HCM	719	0.50	18%	49%	226	14.5	17%
VPL	VINPEARL JSC	Travel Services	HCM	693	0.09	20%	49%	200	92.6	-2%
FPT	CORP FOR FINANCING AND PROMO	Telecommunication Equip	HCM	542	0.92	28%	49%	113	12.0	50%
ITA	TAN TAO INDUSTRIAL PARK CORP	Real Estate Oper/Develop	HCM	526	0.48	38%	49%	58	19.8	4%
SSI	SAIGON SECURITIES INC	Finance-Invest Bnkr/Brkr	HCM	414	1.18	49%	49%	0	6.1	42%
PVS	PETROLEUM TECHNICAL SERVICES	Transport-Services	Hanoi	325	1.00	8%	49%	132	16.9	80%
VSH	VINH SON - SONG HINH HYDROPO	Electric-Generation	HCM	319	0.23	25%	49%	75	19.4	35%
KDC	KINHDO CORPORATION	Food-Baking	HCM	253	0.25	41%	49%	21	13.7	-5%
SJS	SONGDA URBAN & INDUSTRIAL ZO	Building&Construct-Misc	HCM	247	0.32	32%	49%	41	11.3	49%
PVI	PETROVIETNAM INSURANCE JSC	Property/Casualty Ins	Hanoi	227	0.44	13%	49%	81	10.1	45%
ANV	NAM VIET CORP	Fisheries	HCM	203	0.16	22%	49%	56	9.2	-7%

Source: HSBC, Bloomberg, HOSE (Data as of Aug 21)

# Fixed income strategy

- ▶ VGB yields have declined further on improving bank liquidity, and notwithstanding modest SBV liquidity drains
- ▶ Further yield declines are possible on prospects for a near-term inflation peak, FX stability and a possible step-up in SBV easing
- ▶ However, whilst further yield downside is possible, we do not recommend chasing the rally given poor market liquidity, lack of FX hedging opportunities

Vietnam bond yields drifted lower during August, hitting a low of 16% for 2yr, 3yr Vietnam Government Bonds (VGBs) at the 29 August underwriting auction.

## 1. Overview of Vietnam bond yields

Bond	Tenor	25-Jun	28-Jul	3-Sep
Vietnam Government Bond	2yr	21%	20.0%	16.5%
	5yr	20.5%	17.0%	16.0%
	10yr	17%	16.5%	15.0%
Electricity Vietnam Development Bank of Vietnam (VDB)	10yr	22%	21.0%	20.0%
	5yr	22%	21.0%	17.5%
	10yr	17%	20.5%	15.5%
Bank for Investment & Development (BIDV)	15yr	18%	20.0%	15.0%
	10nc5	21%	18.0%	17.5%
	15nc10	22%	17.5%	17.0%
Vinashin	10yr	24%	21.0%	20.0%

Source: HSBC Vietnam

The main drivers of the rally have been:

- ▶ A gradual easing of liquidity conditions in the banking system, which has spurred onshore demand for VGBs;
- ▶ SBV efforts to reduce bank deposit and lending rates;

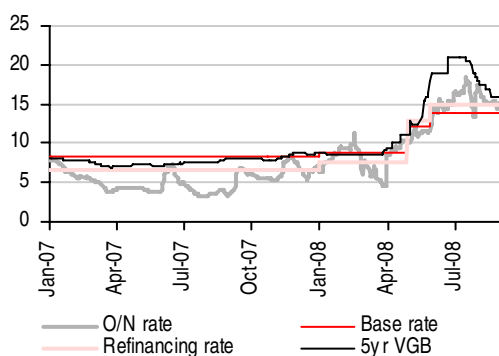
- ▶ A pick-up in offshore demand for VGBs on the back of stabilising macro-fundamentals, e.g. narrowing monthly trade deficits, moderating m-o-m CPI rises, declining oil prices and a stabilisation in USD/VND;
- ▶ A resumption in VGB issuance by the Ministry of Finance, which has led to greater price discovery in VGBs and a tightening of bid-offer spreads.

As mentioned last month, bank liquidity conditions have eased as a result of bank lending coming to a near standstill, while deposit inflows into the banking system have improved following the stabilisation of the VND, deposit rate hikes, tight corporate liquidity and reports of rising foreign remittance inflows.

Moreover, the modest improvement in bank liquidity has also coincided with various official efforts to reduce bank funding costs rates and improve bank liquidity, notably:

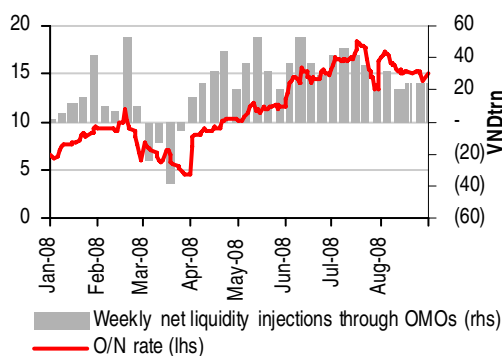
- ▶ A 5.2%-hike in the yield on VND23trn of SBV bills, which banks were compelled to purchase earlier this year from SBV;

2. 5yr VGB yield versus O/N rate and SBV base rate



Source: Reuters, HSBC

3. O/N rate and SBV OMO operations



Source: HSBC, Bloomberg

- ▶ A 2.4%-hike, effective September 1, to 3.6% of the rate that SBV pays on bank statutory liquidity reserve requirements, a measure that according to SBV is “aimed to support credit institutions in reducing lending interest rates and help businesses and borrowers to promote investment and production;”
- ▶ Moral suasion by the authorities on the State-Owned Commercial Banks (SOCB) to reduce deposit and lending rates, which has reportedly been backed up by SBV providing VND20trn of 3mth money at 15% to the four main SOCBs;

Separately, SBV has continued to provide liquidity support to some of the smaller and more vulnerable joint-stock private banks through Open Market Operations and a refinancing of their loan portfolios.

In turn, SOCBs have been able to reduce their time deposits to 17-18% and lending rates (by 1-1.5% to 18-19.5 %) notwithstanding a modest reduction in the size of SBV’s Open Market Operations since July (see chart 3)<sup>5</sup>, while the O/N rate has fallen to 15%.

<sup>5</sup> Since early July, when SBV Open Market Operations hit a peak of VND47trn, net liquidity injections (excluding SBV’s discount window and other special

However, given the significant amount of floating rate bank loans subject to re-pricing during H208 and with the smaller joint-stock private banks still suffering from tight liquidity, there is more limited scope for banks to lower interest rates on bank loans, which have been largely unprofitable over the past few months.

This, in our opinion, forms the main reason why SBV has kept its base rate on hold (which is mainly administrative in nature) during September, although market expectations are that it will try to reduce the base rate by 50bp during October on any moderation in CPI<sup>6</sup>.

### Implications for the Vietnam Bond Market

The recent decline in VGB yields has primarily been driven by the fall in the O/N rate to 15% and the stability in USD/VND, which has attracted

---

*refinancing operations to banks subject to prudential oversight, which approximately total another VND30trn) declined by VND23trn to VND24trn at end-August, which is offset by the provision of VND20trn in 3mth money to SOCBs.*

<sup>6</sup> According to an official with the Ministry of Industry and Trade, CPI could rise by approx. 1% mo-m in September, which would equate to a 28.9% headline rate versus 28.3% y-o-y in August.

offshore demand for yield pick-up. Going forward, a modest further softening of the O/N rate is expected in September as a result of VND7.5trn in Tbill redemptions and another VND1.9trn of VGB/VDB redemptions. This may – as mentioned previously – be followed by a 50bp SBV base rate cut in October.

In addition, risks remain that the authorities may feel compelled to further expand their liquidity injections in order to promote economic growth and if a re-pricing of bank lending rates leads to a wave of loan delinquencies and NPLs. With time deposit rates at 17-18% on average (equivalent to all-in deposit funding costs of 18.75-20%) and bank lending rates around 19-21%, Vietnamese banks currently still face severe margin pressures, while still having limited scope to lower their lending rates further.

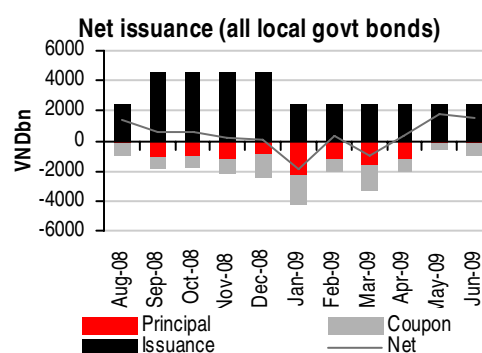
Moreover, even in the absence of sizeable liquidity infusions to kick start bank lending again, SBV's policy to keep the weaker players in the banking system afloat through loan refinancing also suggests that SBV will be providing more liquidity.

Prospects for a further increase in liquidity injections and a gradual softening of the O/N rate point to continued onshore demand for VGBs during September and a further decline in VGB yields. This will be mainly reflected in a further decline in VGB auction target yields as secondary market liquidity remains poor.

Given tight corporate liquidity conditions, increased SBV liquidity injections may not spill over into VND weakness, especially as our FX strategists are pointing to an improving BoP outlook and signs of demand-supply equilibrium in the USD/VND market. Moreover, our economist expects headline inflation to decline towards 24% by year-end after peaking around 29% y-o-y in September.

Such a rally will unlikely be derailed by the resumption of VGB issuance by the Ministry of Finance as only VND8-10trn of residual VGB issuance and VND10trn of VDB issuance is expected until year end. Net of coupon payments and redemptions, this would equate to only VND1.5trn in net issuance until year end.

#### 4. VGB, VDB issuance, redemption prospects



That said, while a further decline in VGB yields and the VND appreciation trend expected by our FX strategists would offer positive returns to offshore holders of VGBs, we do not recommend chasing the rally and may advise scaling back exposure on any decline in VGB yields to around 12-13% - though VGB yields may conceivably decline back to the 7% levels prevailing in 2007 sometime in 2009.

In this respect, the following should be considered:

- ▶ Headline inflation – even assuming positive base effects – may only decline to around 11% y-o-y by end-2009;
- ▶ Given poor secondary market liquidity, investments in VGBs should be considered as a multi-year buy-and-hold investment. In this respect, it should be noted that – notwithstanding our FX strategists view for VND appreciation near-term – the USD/VND exchange rate has historically adjusted for

inflation differentials, even if strong productivity growth needs to be taking into account now. From this perspective, current negative real VGB yields do not offer much compensation to offshore investors, also as the USD/VND NDF curve does not provide any FX-hedging opportunities (providing positive carry) at present – contrary to, for example, Indonesia.

**Pieter van der Schaft**

# FX strategy

- ▶ Better macro data and lower oil prices reinforce stability
- ▶ Evidence of market-clearing within the trading band is also good news...
- ▶ ... and may represent a significant development in exchange rate regime management

Stability in the FX market is becoming entrenched. Recent disclosures reveal that the balance of payments has remained fundamentally healthy. We believe that the likelihood of a renewed flare-up in the domestic economy is diminishing, and that this period of stability will eventually lead to trend appreciation of the VND in the SBV's mid-point fixings.

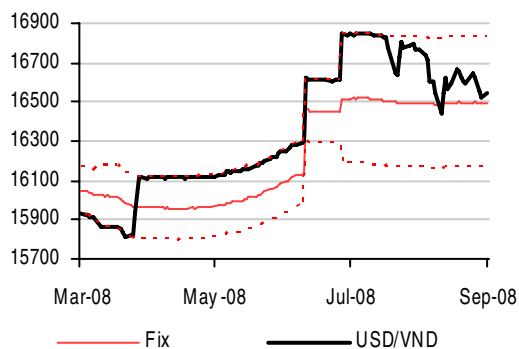
## Stability becoming entrenched

A third monthly macro data release showing continued consolidation in the trade deficit and inflation is reinforcing a view that the domestic economy has stabilised.

Certainly, a repeat episode of 2Q's dislocations due to overheating fears are increasingly unlikely, given our expectations of lower growth and favourable base effects lowering inflation in the coming months (see macro section), as well as the benefit from the recently announced cut in petrol prices. In fact, we believe markets would not be uncomfortable even with some modest easing, though this is not our core forecast.

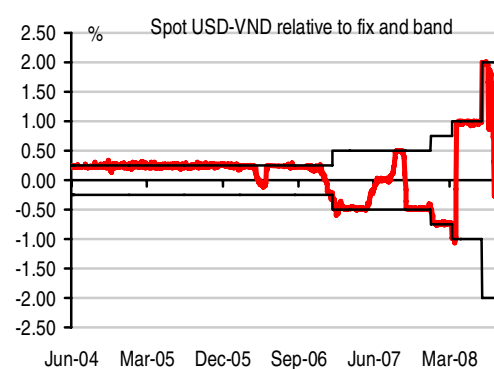
The recent upgrade of the SBV ministry-level status, while it does not grant the SBV any more legal autonomy, does reflect the government's support and confidence in the SBV's recent efforts to stabilise the macro economy. This should also ensure a more rapid response to potential domestic flare-ups down the track.

Chart 1: USD-VND clearing in the middle of the band...



Source: HSBC, Bloomberg, Reuters

Chart 2: ... rather than being limited by its extremities



Source: HSBC, Bloomberg, Reuters

Table 1: Balance of Payments flows (USDbn)

	2006	2007	1Q08	2Q08	3Q08
<b>Current Account</b>	<b>-0.2</b>	<b>-7.0</b>	<b>-5.3</b>	--	--
Trade Balance	-2.8	-10.4	-7.1	-4.9	-2.1
Remittances	4.0	6.4	2.6	2.4	--
Other invisibles	-1.4	-3.0	-0.8	--	--
<b>Capital account</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>17.5</b>	<b>6.8</b>	--	--
FDI dispersed	2.3	6.6	1.5	3.5	3.0
(FDI committed)	7.6	17.9	5.2	24.5	24.9
Other capital flows	0.8	10.9	5.3	--	--
Errors and Omissions	1.4	-0.4	1.5	--	--
Accumulated Reserves	4.3	10.2	3.0	--	--

Notes: 3Q08 projected based on July-August numbers; 2Q08 remittances based on mid-year disclosures, 2Q-3Q08 FDI based on Aug08 YTD disclosure, disclosed estimated August value, and assumed similar July value

Source: Ministry of Finance, CEIC, Officials quoted in local press, <http://www.thanhniennews.com/business/?catid=2&newsid=41567>, <http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn/showarticle.php?num=01BAN020808>.

In addition to a better-looking domestic picture, the decline in global commodity prices is reinforcing stability in flows. When oil prices were spiking, the key focus was on inflation risks, central bank responses, and real rates of return. A reversal in the trend in global commodity prices, particularly oil prices, has shifted the focus back to nominal yields. Especially with a more stable domestic economy, Vietnam's very high yields, relative to its peers in the region, have once again become compelling (also see Fixed Income section). However, this also means that a renewed surge in commodity prices could be a threat to stability.

Meanwhile, fears from systemic risks in the banking system have also eased somewhat, given rising deposits and improving liquidity. The upcoming fall in inflation will make real interest rates even more attractive, reinforcing this improvement. The SBV's increase last week of its overdraft window rate reinforces this suggestion that banking system concerns have eased somewhat.

Together with seemingly improved regime management, the FX market has become more stable and functional than it has been at least the past 12 months.

## Market clearing implies a better balance of flows...

In the past month, spot USD-VND has traded with increasing day-to-day volatility well inside the confines of the trading-band (see Chart 1).

The implication is that the FX market is now clearing at a market-determined equilibrium rate, following a 2Q characterised by volatility and one-sidedness in the market. Certainly the consolidation in the trade deficit suggests that net importer demand for USD-VND has declined to a more modest level than before. Recent BoP data also show that remittances remained surprisingly robust (Table 1). FDI commitments also remain at phenomenal levels – annualised 1H08 commitments equal to 100% of GDP for example – and resumed macro stability will help insure that these commitments are followed with actual flow. This, together with a resumption of portfolio flows, should ensure the current account deficit is well funded.

## ... and hint at a normalising FX regime

This recent USD-VND price action is a significant development and departure from a hitherto established norm where USD-VND persistently traded on either extremity of the trading band

(see Chart 2) – a situation which we had in the past judged tantamount to FX management through price-controls. In addition to a better balance of flows, this normalisation of the FX market is also enabled by a trading band, which at 4%, is now much wider than the 0.5% seen at the end of 2006.

Besides no longer acting as an explicit USD-VND price-setter, SBV is also no longer directly managing flows. No longer the USD supplier of last resort, SBV's earlier moves to ration USD to specific buyers (restricting supply to essential importers, for example) have effectively ceased.

Certainly, should FX market conditions again deteriorate, we would not be surprised if the SBV reasserts its interventionist role. However, for the time being, regime management has become much more market oriented, and this should be seen as an important positive step in Vietnam's FX market development.

**Daniel Hui**

# Disclosure appendix

## Analyst certification

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Our ratings are re-calibrated against these bands at the time of any 'material change' (initiation of coverage, change of volatility status or change in price target). Notwithstanding this, and although ratings are subject to ongoing management review, expected returns will be permitted to move outside the bands as a result of normal share price fluctuations without necessarily triggering a rating change.

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