

Risk Factors

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The table below presents risk factors with probabilities assigned. It also develops the most credible market impacts.

[RISK # 1] Disappointment with the US policy-mix

[PROBABILITY] **75%**

ANALYSIS Donald Trump's election represented a great change in the philosophy of America, less determined now by a logic of "world policeman" and more self-centred. Beyond this major shift, the question was also whether economic policy would be strongly altered, notably through fiscal and tax policy. How would monetary policy accompany these changes? These are all crucial questions. We know that tax cuts and a revival of infrastructure spending are planned, but these measures will have to be self-financed, because the American Congress (even if it is a Republican one) would not want to unconditionally back the new president on these issues. Donald Trump announced some major measures, including corporate tax cuts. If implemented, the effects of this tax cut would likely be felt in many areas, including the repatriation of profits and investment plans on American soil. These developments should be monitored closely.

MARKET IMPACT The measures announced initially no longer seem a top priority. If implemented, they could nonetheless give the equity markets a boost and cause short- and long-term rates to rise. As such, the Fed could easily continue its cycle of monetary tightening. However, if they are not implemented, bet on major disappointment on the financial markets, which, in our view, expected too much from the US president. A close eye should be kept on these developments, which we consider crucial.

[RISK # 2] Italy: a referendum on "Italexit", the next step?

[PROBABILITY] **5%**

ANALYSIS The political situation in Italy remains complex. In the most recent municipal elections, the Five Star Movement and Matteo Renzi were the big losers. The financial markets feared, on the one hand, the holding of early elections (during the second half of 2017?), which could have led to the taking of power by the "populist" Five Star Movement, and on the other hand, the holding of a referendum on membership in the European Union ("Italexit"). Elections are now more likely to take place in 2018. The rise of populism (which is synonymous with the rejection of the establishment, the rejection of traditional parties, the rise of protectionism, the rejection of globalisation, anger against rising inequalities, the refusal of centralisation, hostility to reforms of social systems, etc.) is a reality in Italy, as in many other countries. There is a real risk of major change after 5 years of relative political stability. Such a scenario (the Five Star Movement taking power) would undoubtedly be the worst case scenario, which could initially lead to political instability or crisis and undoubtedly result in a suspension of reforms. Let us recall, however, that the Five Star Movement is more anti-establishment than anti-Europe. Nonetheless, the Italian people are among the least enthusiastic in Europe with regard to the euro. That is to say, a referendum on Europe, if it were to take place, would carry much uncertainty.

MARKET IMPACT The prospect of early elections would trigger a phase of political instability. This is bad news for this country, which is lagging behind in terms of economic growth (especially in comparison with Spain, its "comparable" market). Its debt is nevertheless protected by the ECB's QE programme, which helps prevent flight by investors (who are seeking yield and spreads). In the event of a referendum on "Italexit" (still anti-constitutional at present), the Italian bond market would represent a specific risk, and interest rate spreads would further deteriorate due to a "repricing" of Italian risk. Political instability would also strongly weaken its equity and interest rate markets.

[RISK #3] Misinterpretation of the Fed's intentions... or misjudgement by the Fed

[PROBABILITY] **20%**

ANALYSIS Given the conflicts between the Trump administration and Janet Yellen, it is highly doubtful that the Fed Chair will be confirmed for a second term. Her first term ends in 2018; as for her successor, there has been increasing talk of Gary Cohn, current economic advisor to Donald Trump, as well as Kevin Warsh and Thomas Hoenig). Trump has criticised the "complacency" of monetary policy, and the Republicans have also expressed hostility toward Yellen, particularly with regard to her positions on regulations, the reduction of which has been a priority for President Trump. There has also been talk of the upcoming nomination of more hawkish governors, namely Randal Quarles and Marvin Goodfriend. A misinterpretation of the intentions and decisions of the Fed has long been a major risk factor. With GDP growth of around 2%, inflation close to 2% and unemployment at its current level, the Fed funds rate should be, in a normal cycle, much higher than it is today. The Fed is technically "behind the curve". This is all the more true given that, in half of cases (six out of the last 12 times) since 1945, monetary tightening cycles were followed by a US economic recession within two years. This is undoubtedly what the market fears in the event the Fed moves too quickly and, especially, too strongly. For the moment, the Fed remains cautious. It is expected to raise its rates once more by the end of 2017 and announce a plan to reduce ("normalize"?) its balance sheet (see this month's topic). However, caution is warranted: the Fed must avoid any communication errors. Markets could react poorly if rates are increased prematurely, excessively or without a sound rationale, or in case of a major surprise. The stronger the fiscal and tax stimulus, the more the Fed will be able to raise its key rates without causing too much damage on the financial markets.



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MARKET IMPACT If the Fed fumbles, we can expect a sharp downturn in equities and contagion into the emerging markets, which have already been weakened. Such a situation would widen spreads and interest rates between Europe and the US and further weaken the euro: two factors that favour European risky assets.

[RISK # 4] A “hard landing” for China / the credit bubble bursts

[PROBABILITY] **20%**

ANALYSIS China’s business model has changed in the past decade. Growth is not as export-led as it used to be, and domestic demand has become the key driver for growth. Such an evolution has some drawbacks: there are signs of excessive lending, debt is ballooning, industrial competitiveness has eroded and productivity gains are falling. In simple terms, potential growth is down. The question is not whether future and potential growth will be lower. That is already a given. Rather, it is whether growth risks falling sharply (and far) below its potential (between 3% and 5% at present vs. 10% just over 15 years ago). A close watch should be kept on China’s private debt situation, as a number of debt metrics have turned particularly worrying in the last few years, such as the debt-to-GDP ratio and its long-term trend. This is one of the preferred indicators of the BIS, which considers it the best predictor of a financial crisis. The evolution of this indicator since less than 10 years ago is not very reassuring.

MARKET IMPACT Such a scenario (hard landing, bursting of the credit bubble) would have a very negative impact, and its cascading effects would be especially disastrous: vulnerability in the banking systems, vulnerability in the financial system, vulnerability from China’s public and private debt, impact on commodities and emerging countries, impact on the currencies of commodity-exporting countries, advanced countries, and emerging countries... The Fed would cut its “tightening cycle” short, and the ECB would pursue its QE.

[RISK # 5] Collapse of global growth

[PROBABILITY] **15%**

ANALYSIS A hard landing by the Chinese economy would mean a plunge in global growth, but other circumstances are possible. The continued decline in commodity prices and global trade, an excessively restrictive US monetary policy, and the structural weakness of European economic activity are all stirring fears of a decline in global growth. Until now, the slowdown in the emerging world has been a tangible reality, while the “advanced” world has been moving forward for four years now. Another slowdown in the “advanced world” could come from the secondary effect of the EMG countries (drop in exports), another dip in investment, jobs... in short, from domestic demand (mainly private consumption), at present the key driver for growth.

MARKET IMPACT Putting aside the use of expansionist economic policies (especially the fiscal policy), we could be headed for a new currency war, among the emerging countries on the one hand, and between the advanced and the emerging world on the other. Expect a dramatic underperformance by risky assets, equities, and credit.

[RISK # 6] A recession in the United States

[PROBABILITY] **20%**

ANALYSIS We expect growth of 2% in 2017 (vs. 1.6% in 2016), and in 2018 (2.2%). At this juncture, a recession in the United States is not a possibility, but the Fed’s lack of room to manoeuvre is worrying. The current situation is totally different from 2004-2006. Over those two years, the Fed managed to hike interest rates 17 times—a total of 425 basis points—giving itself leeway, which it was quick to use once the financial crisis hit. Today that context is very remote. The Fed is behind in its economic cycle, and maintaining financial stability, and to a lesser degree the US dollar, rules out the possibility of sharp rate hikes.

MARKET IMPACT A recession in the United States would be catastrophic for the global economy, and Europe, despite being in better health, would not be spared the impact. Short rates would remain low for a very long time and the Fed, with no leeway in terms of conventional monetary policy, would have no choice but to go ahead with QE4. We can expect a very negative impact on risky assets, and especially the US equity market, in a bubble scenario. The initial impact will be negative, and the lack of credibility of central banks would certainly add volatility and stress. Expect further, and substantial, budget imbalances.

[RISK # 7] Sharp devaluation of the yuan

[PROBABILITY] **5%**

ANALYSIS Until now, China has used monetary policy, budgetary policy, fiscal policy, and revenue policy as stimulus tools, careful not to use the exchange rate policy. The implementation of a protectionist policy in the United States would be fatal, the Chinese authorities would be incapable and unwilling to pursue this FX policy, especially since the yuan is not notably undervalued. The Chinese authorities have been forced to step up capital controls in January, a decision that goes against their long-term plan. Beyond the very negative immediate consequences on the financial markets, an abrupt devaluation (of at least 10% in one day) would, without a doubt, be interpreted as an admission of weakness in terms of the economic policy as a whole. A very low risk, but with potentially very great harm, because China’s top challenge now is opening its capital account: attracting international investors means accepting a less-independent monetary policy, a more volatile exchange rate, different rules between the onshore market and the offshore market, more volatile capital flows, less easily administrated markets that

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are more dependent on international investors, greater transparency on the state of businesses, and, specifically, State-owned businesses... in short, a fairly radical change in governance. A strong devaluation of the yuan would be a very bad decision.

MARKET IMPACT In this type of scenario, expect a widespread downward movement in the markets. A surprise devaluation would be the start of a more intense currency war, especially in Asia. Monetary policies would become extremely accommodating to keep currencies from appreciating. A blow to the euro, and to the European economy, because EMG currencies make up a significant portion of its effective rate.

[Risk # 8] A significant slowdown in the emerging economies and/or commodity prices [PROBABILITY] 15%

ANALYSIS Falling commodity prices, the dip in Chinese growth, and the coming shift in US monetary policy (and trade policy) are all factors that, over recent years, have raised fears of a repeat of the 1997-1998 crisis (when emerging markets collapsed across-the-board). We should remember that emerging markets have been under stress since the US ended its QE programmes. Asia had been able to withstand that stress, driven by the strength of the Chinese economy and its ability to curb difficulties, and because it is essentially a commodity-consuming zone. The risk is that domestic demand will unravel and economic policies will become completely ineffective. This risk is nevertheless mitigated by the relative stability of oil prices (increased cohesion at OPEC), the repricing of growth in the United States, Japan and Europe, the “wisdom” of the Fed and the influx of capital (except for China).

MARKET IMPACT Even though the drop in oil prices is a plus for commodity-consuming advanced countries, it is hard to believe that these countries would be totally isolated. With the decline in commodity prices and the downturn in economic activity, we should count on the continued decline in EMG currencies as well as capital flows out of the EMG. Choose asset classes from the advanced countries, and safe havens.

[Risk # 9] The post-Brexit issue weakens the United Kingdom in a lasting way [PROBABILITY] 75%

ANALYSIS “There is no free lunch. Britons must know that,” stated Wolfgang Schäuble. “We don’t want to weaken Britain. But we also don’t want that the rest of Europe is weakened. Britain should not have advantages after the exit that other countries don’t have”. Angela Merkel reiterated that Britons should not “have any illusions” about the Brexit process. The tone has been set. According to estimates, the UK could “lose” between 2.5% and 9.5% of its GDP under this scenario. Trade volume and costs would be affected, specifically in financial services, chemicals, and automobiles, all sectors that are highly integrated in the EU. The risk for the UK resides in its future capacity to trade freely on the single market (the services market, to be more precise), to acquire the desired independence without the EU’s constraints. It seems unlikely, and in any case that is what is at stake in the ongoing negotiations. Several sticking points exist, including access to the single market, and the estimated €60 billion divorce bill that the UK will have to pay the EU.

MARKET IMPACT In such a case, we would expect additional weakening of the pound sterling and long-term GDP of the British economy, two factors that could prolong the monetary status quo.

[Risk # 10] A new European crisis tied to Brexit [PROBABILITY] 10%

ANALYSIS Brexit is unlikely to impact the EU too much, from a purely economic standpoint. Hardest hit would be those with close ties to the UK, especially Ireland, but also Luxembourg, Belgium, Sweden, Malta, and Cyprus, if we look at the nature of exports, direct investment flows, and the financial sector. The risk is primarily a political one: that other European countries might extol a Europe “à la carte,” and/or demonstrate deep divisions in terms of how to handle the UK’s exit. This is not the case today, as the 27 EU countries are standing as one for now. Managing the UK’s exit from the EU is akin to managing the most complex divorce in history. One thing is sure: this is an important test of Europe’s capacity to (once again) manage a crisis, convince Europe that there is a plan for it, and remove any attempts at a Europe “à la carte” that could pop up here or there in the EU. A new European crisis, if it were to occur, could be fatal, unless there is a (highly unlikely) great leap towards federalism.

MARKET IMPACT The negative impacts are all too well known: widening of sovereign and credit spreads, rise of volatility—only this time it would certainly be accompanied by a severe weakening of the Euro. A new European crisis could very well confirm the scenarios of the zone breaking apart, or, at the very least, the weaker countries exiting it... unless the exit scenario tempts the most solid of them, which is highly plausible, because they will end up becoming tired – from a political standpoint – of economically and financially supporting the struggling countries.

[Risk # 11] Greater financial instability [PROBABILITY] 70%

ANALYSIS In the last few years, action by central banks has enabled financial stability to return. Lower short- and long-term rates, reduced volatility and tighter credit spreads are all factors that have generated an environment of greater stability.



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However, beware: (i) This stability has a contrived aspect that should not be underestimated. Central banks cannot resolve all of the problems by themselves (jobs, investment, growth, etc.) and, if the current conditions do not improve more significantly, a certain level of disillusion/disappointment may well set in, which could in turn become a source of instability. (ii) Monetary policies have reached their limits, both negative rates and QEs, and it is quite difficult to expect any more from them. The macroeconomic response would eventually come from fiscal and tax policies, and, traditionally, public spending has far fewer stabilising virtues for the financial markets than lower interest rates.

MARKET IMPACT Greater financial instability would lead to a rise in volatility and credit spreads, particularly in Europe, where the labour market is weaker and the political and social risks are greater.

[Risk # 12] Liquidity crisis

[PROBABILITY] **20%**

ANALYSIS Aside from the risk scenarios outlined above, which could lead to the liquidation of positions and/or portfolios, it is worth recalling once again that the prevailing liquidity constraints call for additional caution. Since the 2008 financial crisis, the decline in investment banks' inventories, the regulatory constraints that have led major players to buy and retain large volumes of bonds, the reduction in proprietary trading and market-making activities and the domination of central banks through QE programmes have all "drained" the fixed-income markets, and closing a position or portfolio now requires more time (seven times longer than before the financial crisis of 2008 if we are to believe a study by the Bank of England carried out a little over two years ago). Even though bid-ask spreads have tightened since the financial crisis (due to the drop in interest rates), tradeable volumes are down sharply, as is the speed of execution, two major reflections of liquidity—or the absence thereof. Remember, the less liquid the markets are the less prices reflect fundamentals, the more they can be manipulated, the higher the risks of contagion are, the higher and more unstable volatility is, and the lower their capacity to absorb shocks. Not exactly reassuring.

MARKET IMPACT This needs to be incorporated into investment decisions and should be taken into account in portfolio-building constraints and stress tests. Expect exit or macro-hedging plans for the less liquid portfolio segments or those that are likely to become less liquid in a crisis. The ECB's purchasing programme is causing lower liquidity (negative) but is also helping to keep volatility low (positive)... Concerns will rear their head again as soon as the debate on the end of QE fills the news, a trend which will certainly increase from now on.

[Risk # 13] Banks collapse

[PROBABILITY] **5%**

ANALYSIS This risk seems highly exaggerated to us. It is true that negative rates are penalising the banks, that the cost of capital remains high (reflecting, in reality, the weight of past crises), and that fears of a new crisis, uncertainty over regulation, and the difficulty for investors to discriminate against banks and against banking systems continue to have an impact. However, we are not pessimistic. The banks of 2017 have nothing in common with the banks of 2008 or 2011: not only have they raised very large amounts of capital, but the ECB's anti-crisis system is now well-established, with banking supervision and stress tests. Moreover, the ECB's liquidity access facilities have drastically reduced specific risk and systemic risk for more than two years. The return of growth is now an asset. It should also be noted that in the past several quarters—and especially since the election of Donald Trump—much of the fixed-income universe has returned to positive territory, and we have seen a steepening of the yield curve, both of which are clear advantages for the profitability of banks. Finally, it should be noted that the problems facing banks can now be more easily resolved (as in the case of Banco Popular in Spain), with systemic risk giving way to specific risk. In short, the situation has improved significantly.

MARKET IMPACT Among the factors causing fragility, the inability to discriminate between banks and between banking systems has long been the most concerning: any rumours or difficulties involving banks have generated waves of stress, widening spreads, and plummeting bank securities. Should this occur again, financial stability would be compromised.

[Risk # 14] Geopolitical risks intensify

[PROBABILITY] **70%**

ANALYSIS Geopolitically, the markets are now operating against a difficult backdrop: Syria, Islamic State, Turkey, terrorist attacks, the Sunni-Shia conflict, the Saudi Arabia-Iran conflict and migrant flows are some of the forces weakening diplomatic ties among countries. Do not expect these ongoing problems and conflicts to be quickly resolved. Incorporating geopolitical risks permanently into portfolios (systematically providing macro-hedging strategies) has more meaning now.

MARKET IMPACT There is no doubt that there will be regular spikes in tension and volatility. The current geopolitical risks are clearly identified and specific. The scale of other political risks, including the consequences of the new direction of US diplomacy, is more difficult to assess at this stage. Is this combination of factors likely to impact on growth prospects or on the financial markets? Nothing is certain at this stage, but the likelihood is very high.

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[Risk # 15] **A sustainable and significant rise in European bond yields**

[PROBABILITY] **20%**

ANALYSIS Particularly since 2016, the risk of higher bond yields comes from the United States, not from the euro area. The increase in American long-term rates can come from at least five sources: (i) a significant upturn in growth prospects, (ii) a more forceful tightening of interest rate policies, (iii) the “genuine” end of QEs (failure to replace maturing bonds), (iv) a resurgence in inflation, or / and (v) a large-scale reversal of fiscal and tax policies. All of these factors (reality, announced measures, or feared) have increased in the United States. We are not expecting the advent of a new growth cycle, but the Fed is continuing its monetary tightening and fiscal and tax policies are expected to become more expansionist. All of this justifies upwards movements in long rates but, in our opinion, it still seems excessive to rely on a permanent and substantial rise. This conclusion holds even more in the case of the euro area: the situation in terms of growth, inflation, the monetary policy cycle, the ECB’s QE programme and the (relatively) weak, ability to re-start the economic engine through budgetary and fiscal policy effectively protect the European markets from rising interest rates. It will protect, but is certainly not enough to prevent long rates from rising. With stronger growth and slightly upward price indices, the debate on the end of the ECB’s negative interest rates and on the end of QEs (balance sheet reduction in the US and cut in the asset purchasing programme in the Euro zone) on one hand, and the debate on the need for fiscal and tax policies to support growth further on the other hand will both gain ground ... All this is undoubtedly enough to bring bond yields to a higher level.

MARKET IMPACT A sharp rise in long rates would be bad news for sensitive economies (France and Germany especially). It would doubtless be worse in the United States, where sensitivity to long-term interest rates has increased with the releveraging of companies, which weakens growth and pleads for a future decline in bond yields. It should also be noted that any rise in long-term rates is a hindrance to monetary policy and to the potential for Fed’s higher interest rates. Another reason for doubting in a sustainable and ample increase in US bond yields.



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