



CIO Memo

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China: Q1 GDP improves on consumption recovery

Key takeaways

- China's GDP was up 4.5% in Q1, higher than the consensus forecast of 4%, confirming the rebound of the Chinese economy since the reopening measures late last year.
- Chinese equities had mixed performance today with China A shares slightly higher but Hong Kong indices lower.
- While Chinese equities could be affected by external risks due to the recession risks in the U.S., we think higher corporate earnings on the back of better growth recovery could support more resilient performance of Chinese equities later this year.

1. What happened?

China's real GDP increased 4.5% YoY, exceeding the consensus forecast of 4.0%. Compared with just 2.9% in Q4 last year, this provided confirmation that China's economy has recovered strongly since the reopening late last year. Consumption was a key growth driver, as its growth further accelerated in March. Retail sales were up 10.6% YoY in March, compared to only 3.5% in Jan-Feb. Industrial production also improved with stronger domestic demand, up 3.9% in March (vs. 2.4% in Jan-Feb).

However, fixed asset investment growth showed moderation in March, up 5.1% YoY in the first three months of the year, compared to 5.5% in Jan-Feb. It was an indication that China's construction activities and property sector investment may have slowed in March on cautious business sentiment.

In addition, the supply chain normalisation and robust near-term global demand conditions (in both developed markets and emerging markets) appear to have supported a recovery in China's export sector in March. China's goods exports rose 14.8% YoY in March, far higher than the consensus of -7%. Goods imports declined 1.4% YoY (vs. consensus: -5%). The trade surplus in March was very high at USD88.2bn. A breakdown by destination shows strong export growth particularly to developing markets.

The credit report for March also exceeded expectations with a solid increase in bank loans and total financing. Bank loans exceeded expectations, rising by CNY3.89tn in March, with the stock of outstanding loans increasing by 11.8% YoY. The details show solid strength in medium- and long-term loans to the corporate sector, reflecting the impact of pro-growth credit policies, including credit support for developers to stabilise the housing market.

2. How did markets react?

Despite the improvement in China's GDP, Chinese equities registered mixed performance today, as investors remained concerned about the weak property market in China. The China A-share Shanghai Composite Index was up 0.2% today. However, the Hong Kong benchmark Hang Seng Index was down 0.6% and the Hang Seng Tech Index was down 1.2%. USD/CNY remained largely stable at 6.879 today.

3. What does it mean for investors?

The better-than-expected GDP indicated that China's economic recovery continued to pick up steam in Q1 this year, particularly with the improvement in household consumption since reopening. That said, we believe we are just at the beginning of the recovery cycle and that there is still potential for a further resurgence in consumption. China's overall CPI index declined to 0.7% in March from 1.0% in February. The producer price index remained in deflationary territory for the sixth consecutive month, falling 2.5% YoY in March (vs. -1.4% YoY in February). The low inflation number suggested that demand for consumer goods remains subdued. Even in the services sector, where the recovery is more noticeable, inflation dynamics vary and are volatile across sub-sectors. Moreover, there are no clear inflationary pressures from either the real estate market or wages. Inflation may pick up in H2 with a more substantial recovery in consumer demand in our view.

While the recovery in consumption could continue with reopening, we think China's export sector could see challenges this year. We think any growth slowdown/recession risks in the U.S. may lead to softer demand for China's exports. Any escalation of U.S.-China tensions may also affect the business confidence of export-oriented companies in China. Property sector recovery may also take time, as households remain cautious of their income outlook given the still relatively weak labour market.

With consumption improving, we expect China's reopening-driven recovery to accelerate in coming quarters. We remain constructive on Chinese equities this year. While near-term headwinds including the continual Fed rate hikes and U.S. recession risks could affect the market sentiment on Chinese equities (especially Hong Kong shares), we think better corporate earnings on the back of better growth recovery could support more resilient performance of Chinese equities later this year.



Glossary

Chinese **A-shares** are the shares of incorporated companies based in mainland China that are listed on either the Shanghai or Shenzhen stock exchanges.

CNY is the currency code for the Chinese yuan.

The **Consumer Price Index (CPI)** measures the price of a basket of products and services that is based on the typical consumption of a private household.

The **Producer Price Index (PPI)** program measures the average change over time in the selling prices received by domestic producers for their output.

USD is the currency code for the U.S. Dollar.



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