

# Japan Rates and FX Watch

## Response to weak yen by MoF or BoJ?

### Limited scope of impactful policy intervention

As USD/JPY has risen above 147, the Ministry of Finance (MoF) is stepping up verbal intervention. Masato Kanda, the MoF's vice minister, said this week he would not rule out any options if FX moves continues as he sees speculative moves unexplainable by fundamentals in the FX market. We previously argued that the MoF would manage FX risk near-term if USD/JPY rises through 150 and volatility increases (3m implied > 12, risk reversal > -0.5) and/or oil price increases (brent > \$90/barrel, see: [Japanese policymakers' "ideal" USD/JPY scenario – market implications 22 August 2023](#)).

However, one question is if the MoF can justify FX intervention when volatility is so low. Unless USD/JPY's move accelerates one way or the other (extreme one day move, or implied volatilities generally increase), policy response may be limited to a modest reduction in the Bank of Japan (BoJ)'s bond buying. Such operational tweak may not be enough to contain the underlying yen weakness while it could add bear-steepening pressure on the JGB curve.

### Carry trade driving JPY weaker + capping vol

JPY is now weaker than at the time of the MoF's intervention in Sep 2022 both in the USD/JPY and effective terms. However, the key difference is that the latest rise in USD/JPY has not accompanied a rise in market volatility with 3m implied volatility only slightly above 9 (Exhibit 1). This may result from the difference in the driver of USD/JPY rallies – while a macro trade drove USD/JPY higher (Exhibit 2), carry trade has been the key driver this year, in our view. Without a rise in volatility, it may be more difficult for the MoF to justify FX intervention than in 2022 as it adheres to the G7 exchange rate commitment (see: Reference: G7 exchange rate commitments).

### Mixed cost-benefit: strong Japan equities + high oil price

Another key difference is the cost-benefit of a weak yen. In 2022, the weak yen's economic and political costs were more pronounced with an elevated oil price, a stagnant equity market, and heightened public concern (Exhibit 3). This time, the Japanese equity market is strong and public attention on the yen's weakness has not escalated yet. However, the recent rise in the oil price may become concerning if it extends as the Brent crude oil price in JPY/barrel has exceeded the level when the MoF intervened in Sep 2022. Given the mixed cost-benefit of the latest yen weakness, it is unclear if the MoF would intervene to slow the USD/JPY rally.

### BoJ can cut bond purchases but scope and effect limited

As the hurdle for the MoF to intervene may be high with low volatility, we see higher risk of a reduction in the BoJ's bond buying operation if we assume coordination between the MoF and the BoJ exists though there are also hurdles for the reduction (see below). But any reduction in the BoJ's bond buying operations may have a limited impact on JPY as (1) the scope for a reduction in bond buying may be limited by the BoJ's commitment to expanding monetary base (Exhibit 4, Exhibit 6) and to prevent a disorderly sell-off in JGBs; (3) USD/JPY rally has been driven by carry, not long-term yield spreads (Exhibit 5).

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FX and Rates  
Japan

**Shusuke Yamada, CFA**  
FX/Rates Strategist  
BofA Japan  
+81 3 6225 8515  
[shusuke.yamada@bofa.com](mailto:shusuke.yamada@bofa.com)

**Tomonobu Yamashita**  
Rates Strategist  
BofA Japan  
[tomonobu.yamashita@bofa.com](mailto:tomonobu.yamashita@bofa.com)

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## Potential reduction in bond buying

There are pros and cons of a reduction in the BoJ's bond buying. Reducing the BoJ's bond buying can have several potential benefits for the government and the BoJ:

- Slow the yen weakness
- Improve market functioning in the JGB market (note the BoJ has not reduced bond buying after the yield curve control [YCC] tweak in Jul)
- Allow long-term yields to rise to the level attractive for domestic investors

On the other hand, there are potential risks associated with it too:

- Give an impression to the market that the FX rate is a determinant of the BoJ's monetary policy
- Risks a rise in yields to uncomfortable level
- Sends an unintended signal for policy tightening

We believe any reduction in the BoJ's bond buying operation would attempt to avoid these risks. The BoJ would likely not reduce bond buying when FX volatility is high (in which case the MoF should deal with FX risk) to avoid the market linking the BoJ's policy to the FX rate and prevent the market from testing the BoJ both via YCC challenge and shorting JPY; it would cut purchases more in the 5-10yr sector and longer, which may be beneficial for domestic investors, and limit cuts in shorter sectors to avoid affecting the pricing on the policy rate.

We estimate around ¥6.6tn / month of JGBs will mature from the BoJ's portfolio in 3Q23 and ¥6.5tn / month in 4Q23 while the BoJ's buying operation is running at the ¥7.4tn / month pace (excluding T-bills). To prevent the BoJ's JGB portfolio from declining and avoid risk of a disorderly selloff, any reduction in the JGB purchases may be limited to a few hundreds of billion JPY / month. The next bond buying operation is scheduled tomorrow on Sep 8 in all sectors except the >25yr sector.

## Weaker JPY and steeper JGB curve

We think risk of a modest reduction in the BoJ's JGB purchases would rise if the yen weakness continues without a rise in USD/JPY volatility but such a tweak would have limited impact on JPY where carry is the primary driver. We think a reduction in the BoJ's JGB purchases would be more likely in the 5-10yr sector and longer, which could add bear-steepening pressure on the JGB curve.

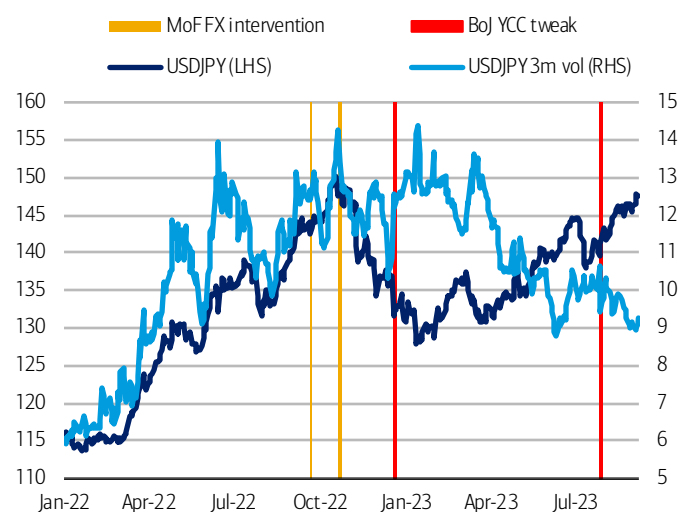
In case USD/JPY rallies above 150 and volatility picks up (USD/JPY rising more than 2% / day or implied vol > 11), the risk of MoF's intervention would likely rise. However, as FX intervention does not impact USD/JPY carry and positioning appears not crowded (see: [FX and Rates Sentiment Survey: Dipping in 11 August 2023](#)), intervention would not be a fundamental solution to the yen weakness. USD/JPY continues to be a dip-buyer's market, in our view.

## Reference: G7 exchange rate commitments

In May 2017, the Communiqué of G7 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors included the following language on FX: "We reaffirm our existing G7 exchange rate commitments to market determined exchange rates and to consult closely in regard to actions in foreign exchange markets. We reaffirm that our fiscal and monetary policies have been and will remain oriented towards meeting our respective domestic objectives using domestic instruments and we will not target exchange rates for competitive purposes. We underscore the importance of all countries refraining from competitive devaluation. We reiterate that excess volatility and disorderly movements in exchange rates can have adverse implications for economic and financial stability."

**Exhibit 1: USDJPY spot and 3m ATM implied vol**

USDJPY rising to key level (150) but vol remains low as carry trade, not macro trade, is driving JPY weaker

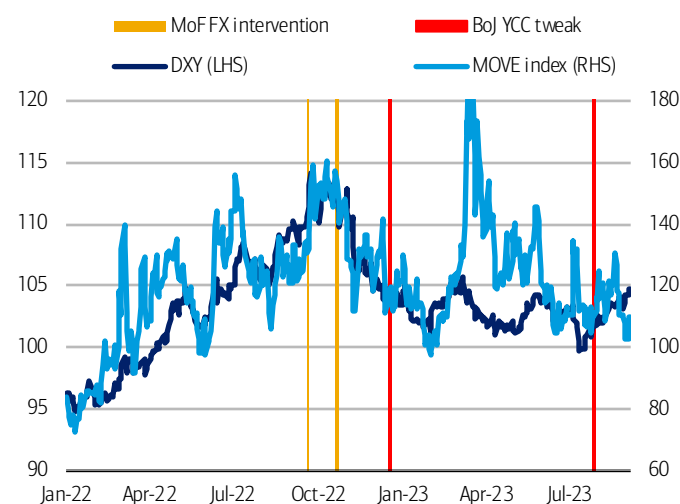


Source: BofA Global Research, Bloomberg

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**Exhibit 2: DXY and MOVE index**

USD and UST remain calm

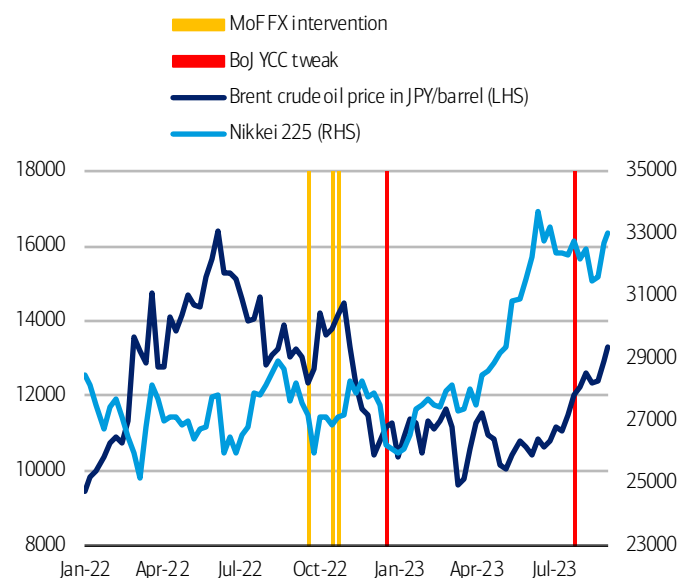


Source: BofA Global Research, Bloomberg

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**Exhibit 3: Nikkei 225 index and crude oil price (JPY / barrel)**

Cost-benefit of weak yen mixed with recent rise in Japanese equities and oil price

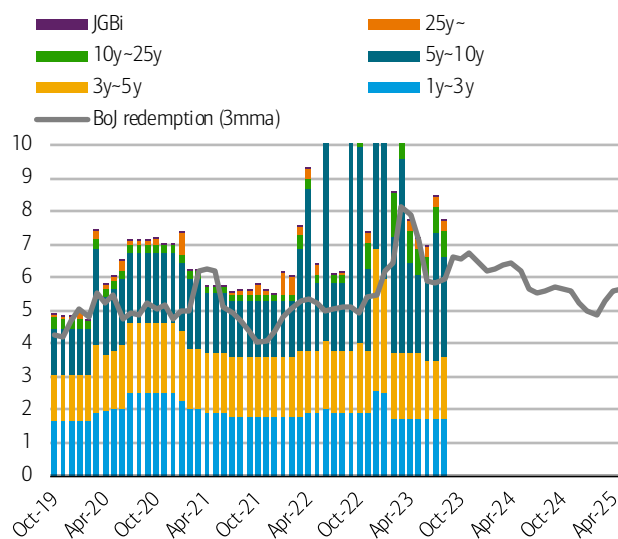


Source: BofA Global Research, Bloomberg

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**Exhibit 4: Redemption of JGB owned by BoJ\* and BoJ's gross bond buying (monthly, tn JPY)**

Scope for a reduction in BoJ's JGB purchases may be limited by its commitment to expand monetary base



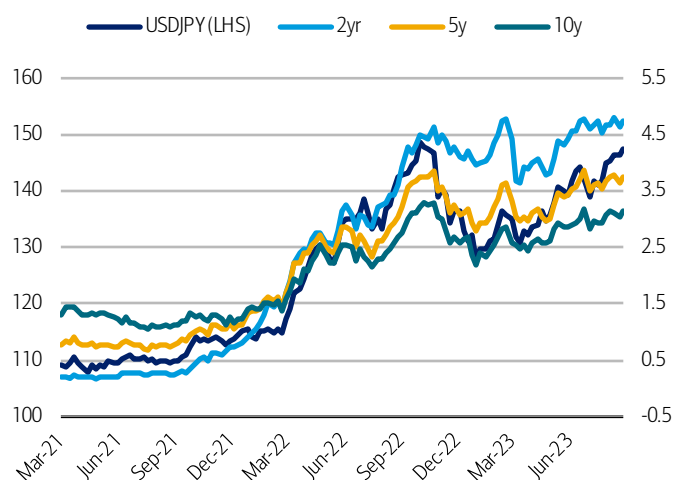
Source: BofA Global Research, Bloomberg

Projection based on current holdings

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**Exhibit 5: USDJPY vs US-JP swap rate spread**

USDJPY outperforming US-JP rates differential as carry drives JPY weaker

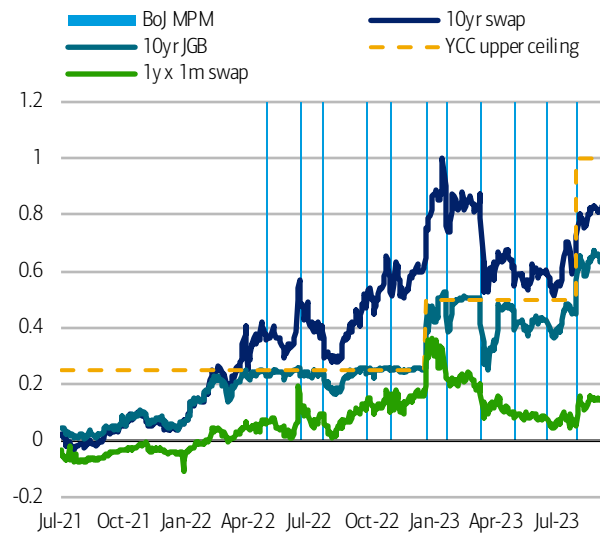


Source: BofA Global Research, Bloomberg

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**Exhibit 6: 10yr JGB, 10yr JPY swap, 1y x 1m JPY swap**

BoJ has scope to let 10yr rise



Source: BofA Global Research, Bloomberg

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