

Overnight selling and Taiwanese corporate demand

- The first trading day of 2018 brought with it the most substantial overnight net selling by investors of long-dated corporates in several years.
- The timing of the selling and the characteristics of the bonds sold suggest Asian real money, particularly Taiwanese Life Insurance companies.
- These investors have represented a recurring part of the demand for USD assets in the last few years, especially High Grade corporate bonds in the long end.
- Taiwanese Life Insurance companies have amassed approximately \$450bn of exposure to overseas assets (including about \$270bn of public securities, the majority of which are long-dated USD HG corporates), which is more than 55% of their total portfolio.
- These sales are likely related to the implementation of IFRS 9 rules, which created the opportunity to monetize gains...
- ... which we believe could have been used to offset FX hedging losses that have accumulated in recent months.
- We do not expect any material near-term shift in investment strategy from these investors. However, the rising cost of FX risk management—particularly if the Fed continues hiking—should be a structural headwind to further net acquisitions of USD assets by Taiwanese life insurers.
- In addition to worsening economics, this raises the risk of regulatory intervention, particularly as related to FX hedging and Formosa bonds.

US Fixed Income Strategy

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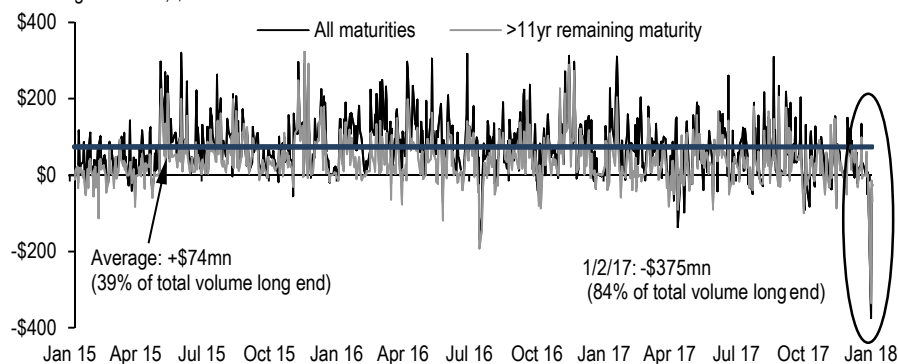
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Exhibit 1: This past Tuesday saw the largest overnight net client selling of High-Grade corporates since at least early 2015—and by a wide margin—the vast majority of which had relatively long remaining maturities

Notional of net overnight client purchases of High-Grade corporates from TRACE data, all maturities and >11yr remaining maturities; \$mn



Note: Overnight defined as before 7:10am EST. Notionals are based on estimated trading volumes due to caps in TRACE reporting.
Source: J.P. Morgan, TRACE

See page 8 for analyst certification and important disclosures.

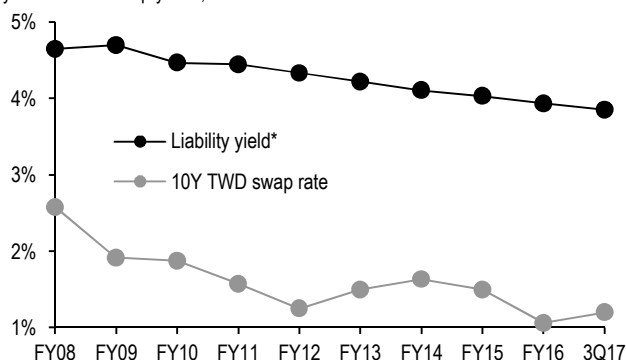
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What can overnight selling tell us about the future of Taiwanese demand?¹

One of the more surprising events to start the year was a sharp pickup in overnight selling of high-grade U.S. corporates. We can see the magnitude of the flows clearly in TRACE data, which show dealers were net buyers of \$465mn of bonds before 7:10am EST last week—the largest such outflow in as long as data have been kept, and by a rather wide margin (**Exhibit 1**). In fact, these figures likely underestimate the total selling by non-U.S. investors on Tuesday (as well as subsequent days), since trades often overlap with the early New York session. Additionally, TRACE data only capture trades from FINRA registered broker dealers, excluding overseas trading desks. The timing of this flow strongly suggests the involvement of Asian real money. **And though we cannot be certain of the seller, the vast majority of bonds traded were longer-maturity points (84% of total volume, compared with a longer-run average of 37% and average maturity of 22yrs for large blocks sold by clients overnight as per TRACE) pointing to Life Insurance companies, particularly in Taiwan.**

Exhibit 2: Legacy policies written in the pre-crisis years have kept liability costs among large Taiwanese life insurers elevated even as local asset returns have declined...

Average liability yield among larger Taiwanese insurance companies versus 10-year onshore swap yields; %

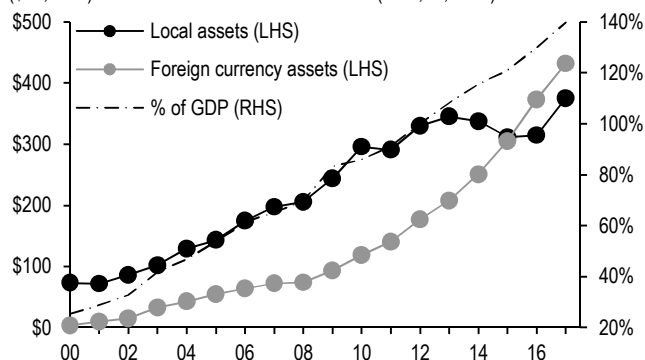


* Includes our equity coverage set: Cathay, China Life, Shin Kong and Fubon Life Insurance. Annual figures with the exception of most recent quarterly disclosure.

Note: Swap yields are averaged over the reporting period.
Source: J.P. Morgan, company filings

Exhibit 3: ... and this has led to them to look overseas in search of yield, which combined with regulatory relief has led to their portfolios being now dominated by USD-denominated assets

Local and foreign currency assets held by Taiwanese life insurance companies (\$bn; LHS) and total AUM as a fraction of GDP (NSA, %; RHS)



Note: Note: Converted to USD as of the end of the period. Annual data except for this year, for which we have data through November 2017.

Source: J.P. Morgan, Taiwan FSC (Insurance Bureau), Taiwan Life Insurance Institute, Central bank of China (Taiwan), Bloomberg

Why are Taiwanese life insurance companies a common driver of overnight flows in U.S. corporates? In addition to being very large—currently \$800bn in total assets, or more than 140% of GDP—the decline in onshore asset returns has forced these investors to look elsewhere to bridge their asset-liability gap. Though a generic problem for life insurance companies globally, the problem is particularly acute in Taiwan. **Among the larger names, liability yields have remained relatively stable over the past ten years—driven in large by high guarantee rates on policies written prior to the 2008 crisis—while easy monetary policy from the CBoC and subdued inflation have pushed local yields lower (Exhibit 2).**

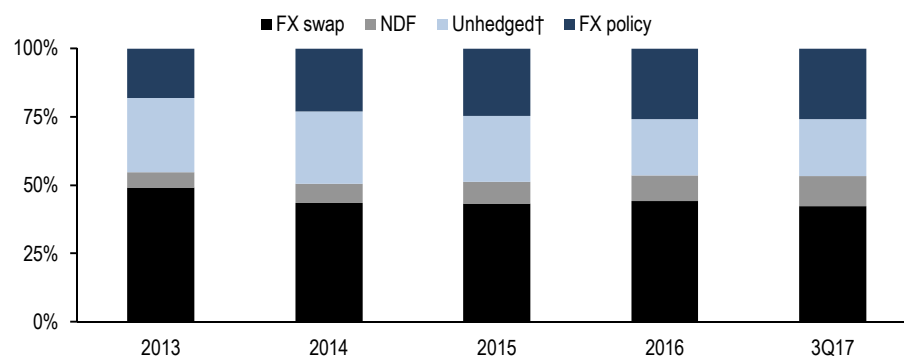
¹ The below note includes a combined discussion based in part on two recent publications. For details, see [Credit Markets Outlook and Strategy](#), E. Beinstein et al., 1/4/18 and [Interest Rate Derivatives](#), *US Fixed Income Markets Weekly*, 1/5/18.

The resulting need for fixed income instruments to invest in combined with the search for higher returns has led them overseas. In addition, the recent regulatory relief has also made foreign currency assets more attractive (including the introduction of Formosa bonds in 2014; for details see [New regulations in Taiwan are bearish for USD vega](#), J. Younger et al., 8/20/14). As a consequence, the majority of their asset growth in recent years has been driven by this component of their portfolio (**Exhibit 3**). At this point we believe they have roughly \$450bn of exposure to USD-denominated assets, or 56% of total holdings, of which roughly \$180bn (40%) are long-dated Formosa-style² callables (up more than \$100bn net of redemptions since 2015). The remaining \$270bn consists primarily of public securities, the majority of which are long-dated USD corporates—with a smaller allocation to other yield enhancement product such as agency CMOs and structured notes. This remaining portion has been growing roughly \$30-50bn a year for the past five years.

This represents a significant part of the long-end part of the standard USD HG bond market. There are about \$1.5tn of HG corporate bonds that have more than 10 years to maturity in our JULI index, and \$1.1tn that have more than 20 years to maturity. We believe that most of the Taiwanese Life Insurers USD HG holdings have more than 20 years left to maturity. Therefore, their holdings represent a non-trivial amount of the very long end USD HG corporate bond market.

Exhibit 4: Only roughly 25% of FX risk in Taiwanese portfolios is term hedged by writing USD policies, with most of the remainder—accounting for half their exposure—managed via the onshore forwards market and a decent fraction relatively unhedged

Fraction of foreign currency assets* by hedge type; %



* Notional balance-weighted across overseas assets held by Cathay, Fubon, Shinkong and China Life.

† Proxy/unhedged includes securities in AFS.

Note: FX policy refers to predominantly (~95%) USD-denominated insurance policies, which act as a natural FX hedge. All as of year-end except current as of 3Q 2017.

Source: J.P. Morgan, company filings

From where is this foreign currency sourced? Typically not from writing USD policies; as of 3Q 2017³ these accounted for just 26% of total FX hedges (**Exhibit 4**). Rather, they are mostly (42% of total hedging activity, or \$176bn in USD assets) borrowed from the central bank via the onshore FX forwards market, usually with 3- to 6-month maturities, with an additional 11% (\$46bn) hedged with offshore NDFs

² Smaller deals and those issued before mid-2014 are not registered locally, and therefore not technically “Formosa bonds” but are comparable in all relevant respects (issuers, lockout terms, maturities, call frequency, etc.).

³ Includes a sample of large insurers based on our equity coverage: Cathay, Nanshan, China Life, and Fubon.

(Non-Deliverable Forwards). **This portion of their portfolio incurs ongoing costs from negative FX carry owing to higher front-end USD versus TWD rates and a negative onshore cross-currency basis** (see discussion below). The remainder (21%, or \$80bn) is either not hedged at all or with proxies, and therefore mostly exposed to short term exchange rate fluctuations. **This could lead to further losses in the event that USD/TWD continues its decline.**

Having accumulated such a large portfolio of U.S. corporates, why the sudden bout of selling? In part we believe this reflects the implementation of IFRS 9 in Taiwan, which took effect this calendar year. Though well-advertised, the major impact for these investors is that they have to reclassify each individual bond to fit into the new IFRS categories. We do not believe that this signals a change in investment strategy, but that this has led some Life Insurance companies to take advantage of this reclassification opportunity to realize gains on bonds that were classified as “Hold To Maturity” (HTM) or “Inactive Market,” possibly to offset losses on other instruments such as the FX hedges they have in place.

As discussed above, Taiwanese insurance companies hold ‘regular’ USD corporate bonds (mostly long end) and also Formosa bonds, which are USD bonds from US issuers, but generally with a call provision, and sometimes registered in Taiwan. These bonds are structured to be attractive to the Taiwan life insurance community and are generally only held by the insurers there. **It is logical that the change in MTM rules has led to selling in ‘regular’ USD bonds rather than callable bonds/Formosa bonds as callable bonds prices cannot increase by a significant amount above the call option strike and Formosa bonds are usually only held onshore.**

The three new accounting categories more or less correspond to the old categories. In essence, the “Amortized Cost” (AC) classification is similar to the previous HTM and Inactive Market categories with bonds held at amortized cost and not sensitive to mark-to-market. The “Fair Value through Other Comprehensive Income” (FVOCI) is similar to the old “Available For Sale” (AFS) category, where bonds are marked to market, but the PnL goes into “Other Comprehensive Income” (OCI) and so flows into the balance sheet rather than into the income statement. Finally, the “Fair Value through Profit or Loss” (FVPL) category is similar to the old Trading category, with the bonds Mark-to-Market and the PnL reported on the income statement and thus impacts Earnings and EPS.

We believe that most Life Insurance companies will classify most of their corporate bonds in the AC category (as their liabilities are not Mark-to-Market) and the rest as FVOCI (so that bond price fluctuations do not affect their income statement). Note that slightly less than 20% of the Fixed Income holdings of Taiwanese Life Insurance companies were classified as AFS and less than 1% as Trading in the old categories. We believe that this will not materially change going forward, with most Fixed Income classified as AC. However, it is likely that relatively more non-callable and non-Formosa bonds will be classified as FVOCI as these are easier to use to actively manage the investment portfolio.

That said, it is particularly notable that these bonds were in fact sold. Assuming that some of these bonds were previously classified as HTM, moving them into the FVOCI category would have led to accounting gains on the balance sheet (but not on the income statement and earnings). **We believe this points to a greater purpose: by realizing the P/L these profits flow through income, and can be used to offset losses associated with FX hedging activity.** Considering the composition of a

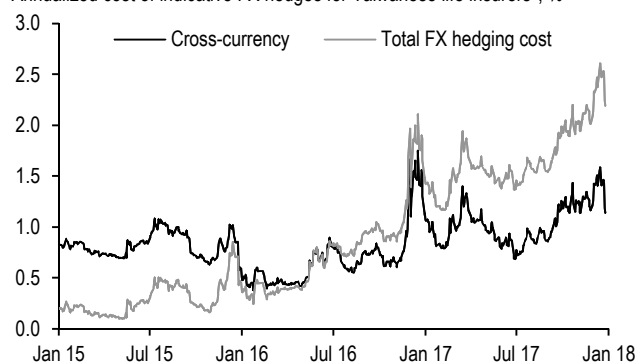
typical Taiwanese life insurance portfolio—i.e., a mix of High-Grade corporates, callables, CMOs and structured notes—selling highly liquid High-Grade paper would likely be the easiest way to raise these funds.

The bonds sold last week are “average” liquid bonds. A detailed analysis of the bonds sold last week shows that they had a similar price as the average price of the bonds in our long-end JULI index and with credit ratings skewed higher than the average. This is based on Investment Grade dealer buys of \$5mn or larger during the early morning hours (before 7:10am EST) on Jan 2-4, 2018, as per TRACE.

Non-Financial bonds represented 2/3 of these overnight trades. 54% of bonds traded were A rated and 29% were BBB rated. The Banks sector represented 1/3 of overnight block trades. Within the traded Bank bonds, 2/3 were Domestic banks and 1/3 were Yankee bank bonds. After Banks, Transportation, Capital Goods and Energy made up the other top sectors, representing around 10% each of the total bonds sold by clients overnight. Bank bonds represented a disproportionately higher percentage of overnight client sells compared with their market share while Utilities, Consumer and Insurance bonds were the largest absentee sectors with no trades in the sector’s bonds. North American domiciled companies represented the majority of bonds that traded (79%)

Exhibit 5: The Fed hiking cycle, and resulting move higher in front-end USD versus TWD yields, has significantly increased FX hedging costs for life insurers, exacerbated by the cross-currency basis...

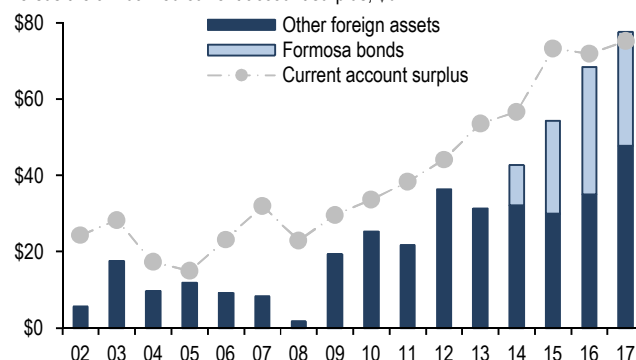
Annualized cost of indicative FX hedges for Taiwanese life insurers*, %



* Estimated from annualized carry on 3-month onshore FX swaps. Cross-currency basis is derived from the same.
Source: J.P. Morgan

Exhibit 6: ... the latter of which likely reflect at least in part the fact that net acquisitions of USD assets by these investors are now outpacing the total current account surplus

Annual acquisitions of foreign currency assets, split into Formosa bonds and others, versus the annualized current account surplus; \$bn



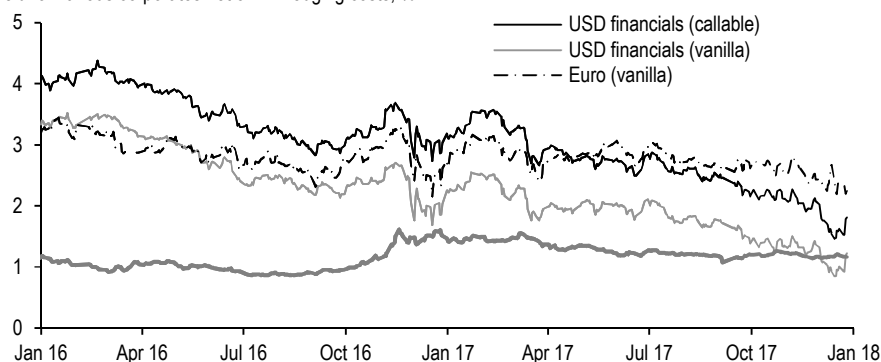
Note: Taiwanese foreign currency life insurance assets (reported in local currency) converted to USD as of the end of the period using spot USD/TWD exchange rates. Anecdotally roughly 90% of these assets are USD-denominated. For this year we annualize using current account data through 3Q and life insurance holdings through November 2017.
Source: J.P. Morgan, Taiwan FSC (Insurance Bureau), Taiwan Life Insurance Institute, Central bank of China (Taiwan), Bloomberg

We believe that selling “standard” bonds indicates a tactical/opportunistic trade rather than a structural change in investment strategy. Indeed, it is normal for an investor to actively manage the instruments classified as FVOCI (i.e., the old AFS). It is therefore meaningful that they did not sell less liquid bonds that are more likely to be classified as AC (i.e., the old HTM). Indeed, if the goal was to realize the largest possible price gain, then selling illiquid bonds would have been a better strategy: illiquid bonds have outperformed in the 2017 rally, as they usually do when there is a long market rally and low volatility.

Nevertheless, this might indicate more acute FX funding pressures in the onshore USD/TWD market. As we discuss in a prior publication (see [The future ain't what it used to be](#), J. Younger et al., 10/20/17), thanks to rapid growth in their foreign currency assets, Taiwanese life insurance portfolios are now more than 55% USD-denominated (relative to 38% five years ago). Because they only write a rather small percentage of USD policies, the rest of this portfolio is funded with short-term FX swaps. The carry cost of these positions has been increasing thanks to the combined effects of both a wider front-end yield differential and more negative onshore cross-currency basis (Exhibit 5). The latter likely reflects the relative scarcity of onshore dollars, as net acquisitions of foreign currency assets (more than 90% of which are USD) is now comparable to the entire current account surplus (Exhibit 6).

Exhibit 7: Taking into account FX hedging costs, USD-denominated callables are now offer comparable net yields to EUR financials

Yield for various corporates net of FX hedging costs; %



Note: USD vanilla financials from the JULI index for long-dated corporates. Indicative zero coupon callable IRRs are estimated assuming a funding spread equal to the average 5-year CDS spread of Libor panel banks. Euro financials are 30-year swap rates plus 10-year iBoxx CDS spreads. FX costs are the annualized 3-month carry for an onshore swap.
Source: J.P. Morgan

Reflecting this, EUR-denominated benchmark corporates—i.e., non-callable paper—currently offer higher net yields (and neither are much higher than local sovereigns; Exhibit 7). In recent news, the local regulators (FSC) recently [announced](#) new, stricter FX risk management rules; we believe these tighter controls likely increase overall hedging costs, all else equal (see discussion in [Taiwan insurance](#), J. Huang et al., 1/5/18). Not to mention the progression of the Fed hiking cycle, where we expect four hikes as compared to less than three currently priced in; this should push front-end USD yields higher relative to both G4 and TWD rates.

A closer analysis of the yields of corresponding EUR and USD denominated bonds from the same issuer and with a similar time to maturity shows that the “realized” yields for Taiwanese investors have been in line for a few months after hedging for FX risk with a 3m FX forward⁴. As shown in Exhibit 9, the USD hedging costs for Taiwanese investors steadily increased over the last two years while the EUR hedging cost remained relatively constant. As a consequence, EUR and USD bonds have traded on top of each other for a Taiwanese investor who hedges with the respective FX forwards. Furthermore, our bond pairs analysis shows that it has been advantageous for a Taiwanese investor to buy EUR bonds in the long end (10-30yr) for the past several months. The 7-10 year category shows a similar trend. The recent cheapening of the USD/TWD 3m FX hedge has brought the

⁴ This is based on a portfolio of approximately 350 matching bond pairs.

attractiveness of EUR and USD bonds in line again, however. The analysis shows very similar results when looking at Fins and Non-Fins individually. **As shown in the exhibit below, this has been true for several months. However, we have not heard of any anecdotal evidence that Taiwanese investors have increased their EUR HG corporate bond buying programs over the last year.**

To be clear, we do not expect a wholesale repositioning of Taiwanese life insurance company portfolios at this point, nor a substantial change in their near-term shift in their investment strategy. And the availability of onshore assets remains an important constraint. Turning to Euros is a clear alternative given the relative pricing; however, at this point liquidity in that callable market remains much less than in USD. **But all else equal, rising FX hedging costs likely constrain their ability to purchase USD assets at the same pace as the past couple of years. And for callables in particular, it raises the prospect of intervention in the Formosa bond market, which was created specifically to circumvent control on foreign currency exposure.**

Exhibit 8: EUR and USD HG realized yields have been in line for Taiwanese investors after the cost of FX hedging recently

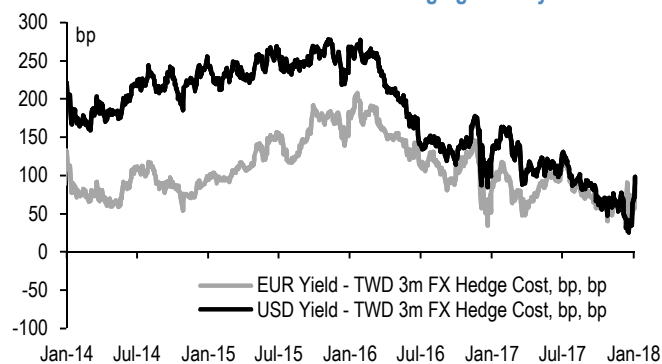


Exhibit 9: The 3m TWD/USD 3m FX hedge has cheapened recently, slightly more than the TWD/EUR 3m FX hedge

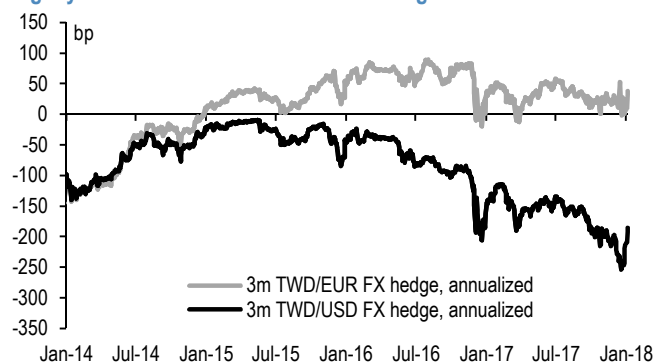


Exhibit 9: 7-10yr EUR HG corporates briefly offered a higher realized yield for Taiwanese investors before the recent correction...

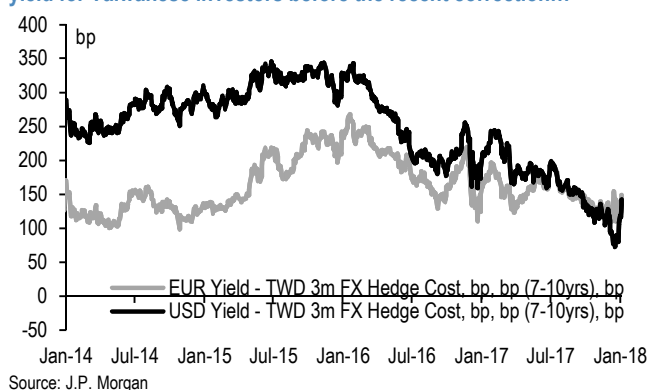
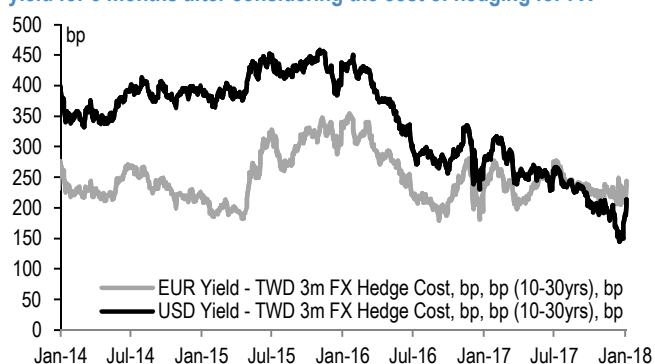


Exhibit 10: ... while 10-30yr EUR HG corporates had offered a higher yield for 3 months after considering the cost of hedging for FX



Note: FX hedge costs from 3-month onshore USD/TWD and EUR/USD 3-months forward versus spot.

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