

Market and Volatility Commentary

Narrative vs. Flows, Liquidity-Volatility-Flows Feedback Loop, QE/QT and Liquidity

Narrative vs. Flows

Since our last note, the market continued moving higher from heavily oversold levels and low investor positioning. Positioning has somewhat increased but still remains subdued (all HF beta: ~9th %ile, Volatility Targeting Beta: ~1st %ile, CTA beta ~15th %ile, Equity HF beta ~8th %ile, JPM PB HF net exposure ~7th %ile, gross exposure ~10th %ile). S&P 500 options gamma imbalance subsided from an average ~\$50bn towards puts (dealers short gamma) in December to slightly long gamma now. This creates a necessary condition for market volatility to decline and continue driving equity inflows from volatility-sensitive strategies. These strategies are currently adding ~\$1bn per day (e.g., volatility targeted insurance portfolios), which will accelerate if volatility stays subdued. While fixed weight portfolios (e.g., pensions) increased risk the last week of December, they may reduce risk the last week of January. Trend investors could close some shorts/add longs if the market moves a bit higher to reclaim short-term signals (e.g., 50d MA, 1M return). Two key risks that we highlighted in the past (Fed's monetary policy and trade war) have subsided, but new risks have emerged: US government shutdown and signs of additional slowdown outside the US. Risks around the upcoming earnings season are balanced, in our view. On one hand, we could see further downside for Q1 guidance, but on the other hand already reduced expectations and low positioning can result in upside moves. Low positioning could manifest itself as stocks moving higher on underwhelming results (e.g., stocks open lower and drift higher).

Bearish sentiment and narrative are currently consensus among investors, and positioning is very low. Investors should keep in mind that the narrative is often driven by price action, and price action is driven by flows and positioning. For instance, during the May-October period last year, there were strong inflows on account of declining volatility in the aftermath of the Feb-April turmoil. These flows pushed the market higher, despite negative seasonality, the fact that the trade war was escalating, and that there were expectations for a continuation of the quarterly rate hikes at the time. Once deleveraging started in Q4, stocks were moving lower regardless of the narrative (e.g., many stocks sold off on decent Q3 earnings and the market sold off after the G20 and Powell pivot). At the very end of the year, stocks first crashed and then strongly rallied on virtually no news but large flows (mutual fund selling, pension fund buying). One should keep in mind that if volatility stays low, inflows may result in the market drifting higher, which could in turn change investor sentiment and the whole market narrative.

Global Quantitative and Derivatives Strategy

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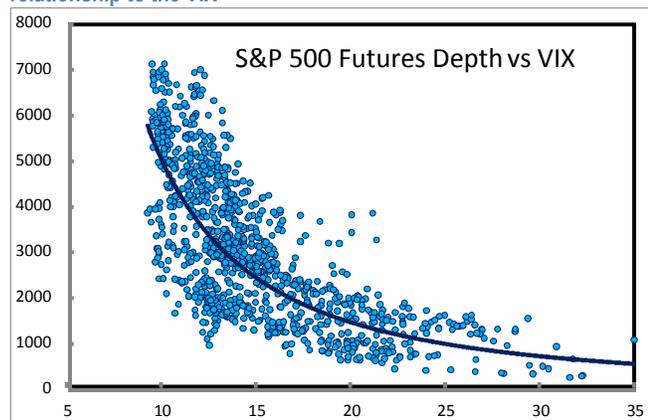
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Liquidity-Volatility-Flows Feedback Loop

In our previous note we described in broad terms the feedback loop between volatility, liquidity, and flows. We call this feedback loop market fragility. Several clients asked us to explain in more detail these effects (e.g., how, how much?). Interest for this topic comes from various clients – those that are assessing the impact of flows to the broad market and their portfolios (fund managers), those that position for and anticipate these flows (speculators), and those that are assessing the robustness of different systematic investments (investors). As we mentioned in our [last note](#), systematic flows come from different parts of the financial industry (market making, buy side, insurance), and can result in different flow patterns.

First we want to demonstrate the link between Volatility and Liquidity, and show how market depth – the key measure of liquidity – got worse over time. Figure 1 shows the relationship between S&P 500 futures market depth and the VIX. One can notice that this relationship is very strong and nonlinear (e.g., market depth declines exponentially with the VIX). Given that an increase in volatility often results in systematic selling, this relationship is the key to understand market fragility and tail events. The second question was if this relationship was always the same or the situation got worse over time. To answer this we show the historical relationship between liquidity and the VIX over time (Figure 2, rolling regression slope between liquidity and the VIX). One can see that the negative relationship between liquidity and the VIX got worse over the past decade (note that an exponential relationship can be locally approximated with a linear relationship and tracked over time). Finally, we note that at times of high volatility, the VIX is almost the sole driver of market liquidity. Figure 3 shows the % of liquidity variation that can be explained with the VIX over time (rolling R-squared). The higher the VIX, the more liquidity is driven by the VIX, and recently up to ~80% of liquidity variations were explained by the VIX. To conclude, we showed that there is a negative relationship between volatility and liquidity, that this relationship is getting stronger over time, and that it is particularly strong during times of elevated volatility.

Figure 1: S&P 500 E-mini futures depth shows a strong (exponential) relationship to the VIX



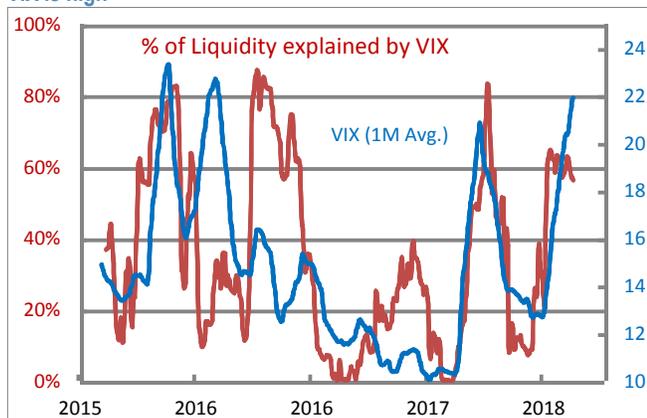
Source: J.P. Morgan QDS.

Figure 2: The regression slope between liquidity and the VIX got larger over time



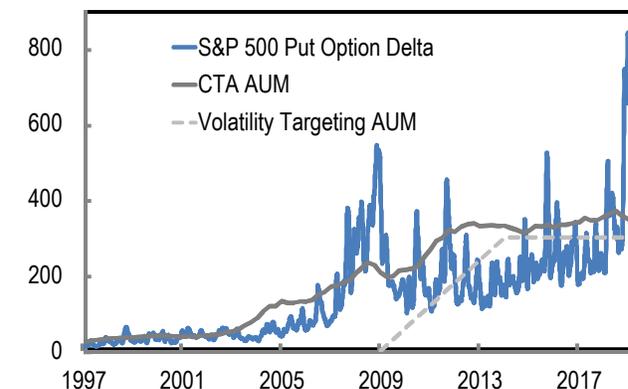
Source: J.P. Morgan QDS.

Figure 3: The VIX explains a larger proportion of liquidity when the VIX is high



Source: J.P. Morgan QDS.

Figure 4: Comparative size of 'short gamma' strategies*



Source: J.P. Morgan QDS, BarclayHedge. *Volatility Targeting AUM time series is purely illustrative/very approximate

We will next show that volatility also plays a significant role in determining the flows from various systematic strategies (note that we define systematic flows to include derivatives hedging flows, passive and quantitative investment strategies flows, insurance industry and programmatic market making flows). An increase in volatility typically leads to an increase in systematic selling, which happens in an environment of reduced liquidity, and hence can produce outsized market impact. As mentioned above, we refer to this feedback loop between volatility, liquidity and flows as market fragility. We do note that during times of high volatility/low liquidity, not only systematic strategies but also discretionary managers sell, albeit typically they tend to sell slower and/or later during the sell-off episodes (see further below).

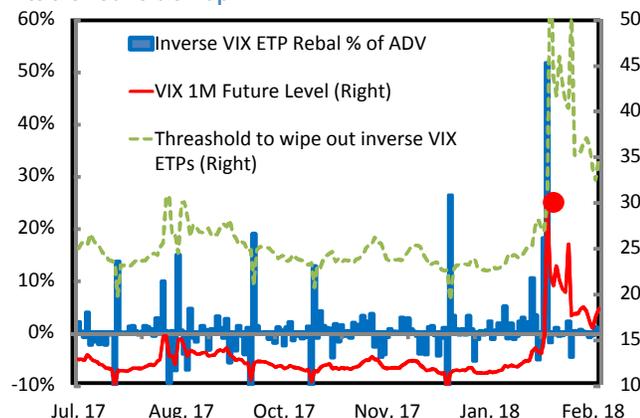
Let's look at the various examples of systematic flows, their impact on the market and their own performance, and speculative activity related to these flows. The largest of all systematic flows by size and impact is that of index options hedging. Figure 4 shows the delta weighted open interest of S&P 500 index puts, in comparison with an asset estimate of two other 'short gamma' strategies – CTAs/Trend-Following and Volatility Targeting strategies. One can see that the largest component of systematic flows comes from option hedging, but given the increase of trend-following and volatility targeting these components cannot be ignored.

We have extensively documented the impact of index option hedging flows in our previous research (see [here](#), [here](#)). We also closely follow the speculative activity around these flows. At the onset of volatility, these flows can significantly impact the market near the close. It takes a few days before speculators establish the positioning and hedging patterns and start anticipating these flows (see [here](#)).

Another systematic strategy with predictable flows is levered and inverse exchange traded products – similar to index options hedging, these products are short gamma (note that levered/inverse ETF gamma is typically much smaller than index option gamma). Given that levered and inverse ETFs are short gamma, their rebalancing results in systematic flows that can be anticipated by speculators, which negatively affects the performance of these products (see [here](#) and [here](#)). A recent example is the demise of the inverse volatility product XIV. When volatility increased in February, the size of rebalance could not be digested by the market. Liquidity

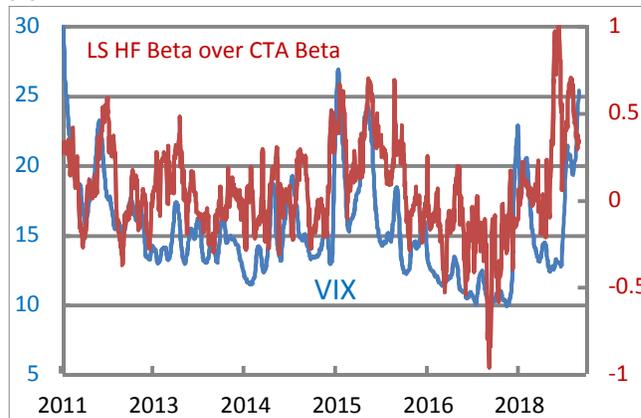
providers, with knowledge of large rebalance flows, were not eager to step in until the product self-destructed. Figure 5 shows rebalance flow as % of average daily VIX volume as well as the level of the VIX at which product ‘self-destructed.’ As soon as the VIX “tagged” this level, volatility quickly subsided.

Figure 5: Rebalance flow for inverse VIX ETPs, as a % of 3M ADV, into the Feb’18 blow-up



Source: J.P. Morgan QDS.

Figure 6: Difference between the beta of long-short HFs and CTAs to the VIX



Source: J.P. Morgan QDS, HFR.

Trend following and volatility targeting strategies are also typically short gamma. Volatility targeting can be applied to any portfolio (e.g., 60/40, risk parity, factor portfolio, a platform of fundamental PMs, etc.). Volatility targeting is explicitly short gamma in a mean-reverting market. The strategy reduces risk when volatility is rising and increases risk when volatility is falling. This is by design (risk exposure $\sim 1/\text{volatility}$), and in that way flows from these strategies are closely related to option hedging. Note that we estimate the notional amount of these strategies at $\sim \$300\text{bn}$ in multi-asset portfolios, which is much smaller than the delta weighted put open interest in Q4 of $\sim \$750\text{bn}$ notional just for the S&P 500 index. In addition, these strategies sell over several days (unlike option hedges that sell within a day). CTAs’ short gamma exposure is not explicit, but still intuitive as they sell when an asset price declines, and buy when it goes up (additionally, many CTA strategies volatility target). Of course, not only systematic investors sell into VIX spikes. Equity long-short hedge funds also sell into VIX spikes, but perhaps less programmatically and aggressively. An indication for this is the sensitivity of funds’ beta to the VIX. For instance, CTAs’ beta to the VIX is about ~ 4 times higher than equity long short HFs’ beta to the VIX (e.g., -3.5% vs -0.9%). Figure 6 shows the difference between the beta of equity long-short HFs and CTAs and the VIX. When the VIX increases, CTAs are quicker in reducing beta (selling stocks) than equity long-short hedge funds.

The analysis above by no means passes judgment on the merits of various short gamma systematic strategies that are often used for hedging or risk control. We do note that these strategies require adjustments due to the changing market environment (e.g., liquidity-flow-volatility feedback loop, speculative flows, etc.). If systematic flows are significant enough to impact the market, they will impact their own performance via speculative flows and market impact.

Which strategies may be impacted – some simple checks would include:

- Strategies where the asset base and flows are large relative to market liquidity (i.e., crowding).

- Strategies where the flows are correlated to volatility. The reason for this is the volatility-liquidity-flow feedback loop, which makes the effective asset size ‘appear larger’ than it is. Strategies that are inherently short gamma are affected more.
- Strategies that are entirely transparent and don’t adjust along the way (e.g., if a strategy is documented in a prospectus or academic whitepaper, it will more likely invite ‘copycats’ or speculative flows).
- In addition to the above, poor performance of a strategy may indicate crowding or damage from speculative flows or short gamma exposure.

QE/QT and Liquidity

Given the recent collapse in liquidity and the feedback loop of flows-liquidity-volatility, investors are very attentive to monetary policy measures that may affect liquidity. The most closely watched metric is the pace of the Fed’s balance sheet reduction. For instance, a recent example is the negative market reaction on the comment that balance sheet reduction (QT) will be on autopilot (and positive reaction when this statement was later modified). Even passing remarks on the balance sheet can have visible and significantly negative intraday impacts on markets (e.g., recent remarks that the balance sheet should be substantially smaller).

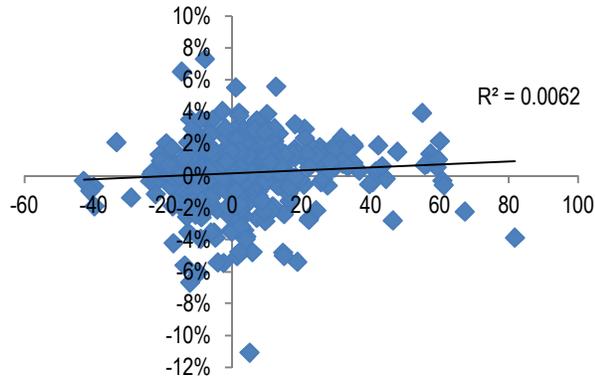
Why is there such a focus on the Fed’s balance sheet from investors? Adding liquidity in the form of QE had a positive impact on asset classes over the past decade. We estimated the impact of QE to be ~20% of equity prices based on causality tests (see our report [here](#)). The questions investors struggle with are how negative was/will be the impact of the QT. It is plausible that dollar for dollar, QT has a significantly larger impact than QE. The reason for that may be the above-explained fragility feedback loop. During QE, both central banks and investors more broadly buy assets in an environment of low volatility/increased liquidity when the impact is small, and during QT assets are typically sold while liquidity is removed, compounding the negative impact of other outflows.

To our knowledge, there is no broadly accepted understanding of the exact mechanics and magnitude of QT’s impact (e.g., how much it is a signal to the market, vs. mechanical supply/demand and price impact). There is a significant relationship between the Fed’s balance sheet changes and the market, but the big drivers of this relationship are points when the large QE programs were announced such as March 2009 (e.g., when this point is taken out, the relationship no longer appears statistically significant; Figure 7 shows the weak contemporaneous relationship since the start of 2010). Whatever the real mechanical impact is, likely the impact on market sentiment is much larger (i.e., self-fulfilling impact). In support of that are recent intraday movements on balance sheet mentions, as well as the price action of the S&P 500 during Q4 shown in Figure 8. While there may be little or no mechanical impact on equity prices, most macro traders are not ‘fighting the Fed’ – when liquidity is added they are buying assets, and when liquidity is removed they are selling assets. Over the past months, we have heard a large number of anecdotes where investors avoid buying risky assets during (or actively sell into) weeks when there is a significant balance sheet reduction (e.g., traders taping the schedule to their screens, blogs and email chains, etc.).

In this way, balance sheet reductions put significant strain on market sentiment, on flows and on the weakest link in the market – the liquidity-volatility-flow feedback loop. If the balance sheet reduction is a signal to sell, volatility increases, liquidity

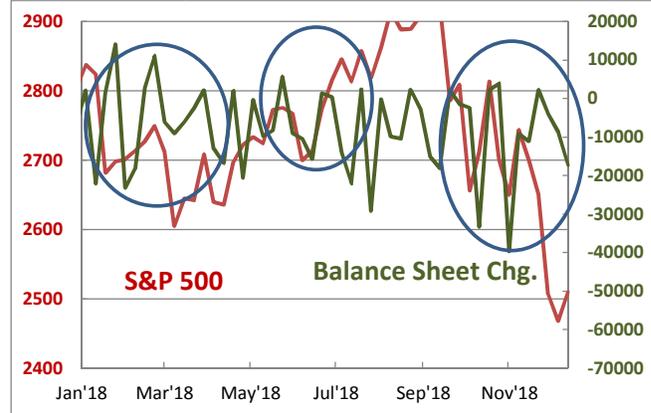
decreases, and additional systematic flows are triggered. Balance sheet driven market fragility is thus increasing the risk of market disruptions and ultimately the risk of a recession – which is in contrast to policy makers’ intentions.

Figure 7: Fed weekly balance sheet change (x-axis, \$Bn) vs. S&P 500 returns (y-axis) was not statistically significant (since 2010)



Source: J.P. Morgan QDS, Bloomberg.

Figure 8: S&P 500 performance and Fed w/w balance sheet changes



Source: J.P. Morgan QDS, Bloomberg.

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