William Blair

3Q 2018

Fund Manager Commentary
William Blair SICAV Emerging Markets Small Cap Growth Fund

Fund Performance & Positioning

The William Blair SICAV Emerging Markets Small Cap Growth Fund underperformed its benchmark, the MSCI Emerging Markets Small Cap Index (net), during the third quarter. Underperformance was primarily driven by negative stock selection across most sectors amid the difficult style environment. Information Technology, Health Care, Consumer Discretionary and Industrials were the most notable detractors. Within IT, both the overweighting and stock selection weighed, dragged down by Taiwanese wafer and passive components holdings. After a strong rally in previous quarters the group corrected in the third quarter amid decelerating operating momentum coupled with high expectations and broad sector rotation. Health Care performance was hampered by the de-rating in Chinese healthcare companies on the back of the country's vaccine scandal and concerns about the government's focus on drug price reductions. Consumer Discretionary was affected by the weak performance of China Maple Leaf Education, the K-12 school operator. The share price weakness was driven by regulatory changes regarding private investment in education. Within Industrials, 51Job, the Chinese online recruitment company, hampered relative results as the stock weakened as a result of a moderating growth outlook and extended valuation. Partially offsetting these effects was the underweighting to Industrials and positive stock selection within the Energy sector as Yantai Jereh Oilfield Services, the Chinese oilfield services company, was boosted by higher oil prices.

From a regional perspective, Emerging Asia was a key detractor to relative performance, hampered by China and Taiwan stock selection coupled with the India and China overweightings.

In particular, Consumer Discretionary, Health Care and IT weighed on China results while IT holdings hampered relative performance in Taiwan. These negative effects were somewhat mitigated by positive contributions from Latin America and to a lesser extent EMEA.

During the period, Real Estate exposure was reduced through the liquidations of Chinese property companies CIFI Holdings Group, Yuzhou Properties and Kwg amid government policy headwinds for property developers. IT was also reduced through position trims and liquidations. The semiconductors weighting was reduced through the sale of Wonik IPS, the Koran semiconductor equipment manufacturer, amid a weaker demand backdrop and growth concerns. Energy exposure was increased to an overweight position during the period through additions to oil services companies Yantai Jereh Oilfield of China and Dialog Group of Malaysia. Exposure to Utilities also increased as a result of the purchase of Mahanagar Gas. The company is the city gas producer with a dominant position in Mumbai, and benefits from solid volume growth and high profitability due to its superior infrastructure. From a geographic perspective, notable adjustments were increases to India and Mexico, offset by decreases to China.

Top 10 Holdings as of 30.09.2018

Company Name	***% of Fund***
IRB Brasil Resseguros S/A	2.4%
TCI Co., Ltd	2.1%
Banco del Bajio S.A.	2.0%
Bangkok Chain Hospital Public Company Limited	1.9%
Home Product Center Public Company Limited	1.9%
Indorama Ventures Public Company Limited	1.6%
Fila Korea Ltd.	1.6%
Grupo Aeroportuario del Centro Norte, S.A.B. de C.V.	1.5%
Hoa Phat Group Joint Stock Company	1.3%
Dialog Group Berhad	1.3%
Total of Top 10	**17.6%**

Market Outlook & Outlook

Global equities advanced in the third quarter primarily driven by the U.S. significantly outperforming non-U.S. developed and emerging markets — continuing the trend of U.S. equity dominance. The U.S. bull market run became the longest in history despite escalating concerns on geopolitical tensions and rising interest rates, as Treasury bond yields surged higher in September.

U.S. equities extended year-to-date gains on robust strength in corporate earnings and positive signs of continued economic growth. Health Care and Information Technology drove outperformance. Mega-caps within IT, such as Amazon, Alphabet, and Apple, extended to record highs on consensus-beating quarterly results. This market cap leadership was representative of the broader U.S. market performance as large caps outperformed their small cap counterparts by approximately 3.2%, as measured by the MSCI U.S. Standard and Small Cap indices.

Non-U.S. developed market equity performance was mixed in the third quarter with positive performance in Japan and weaker returns in the U.K. Japanese equities rallied on the reelection of Shinzo Abe to the leadership position of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party; a positive signal to investors that Abenomics policies would continue. The reelection coupled with a weakening yen bolstered investor sentiment in September bringing Japanese equities into positive territory year-to-date. Within the U.K., the pound slumped to an 11-month low versus the U.S. dollar on Brexit uncertainty and growing fears about the potential collapse in talks. U.K. equities recovered in September, but remained down (-2.00% MSCI U.K. IMI) for the quarter.

Emerging markets equities continued to decline in the third quarter and year-to-date amid heightened geopolitical tension and a strengthening U.S. dollar. The Turkish Lira plunged to record lows following the U.S.-imposed sanctions on Turkey for failure to release evangelical pastor Brunson. Russian and South Africa currencies sold off in solidarity with the Turkish Lira. Trade war rhetoric remained a headwind for China, compounded by concerns about decelerating macro indicators and the weakening renminbi currency, which further weighed on sentiment and Chinese equities broadly.

From a style perspective, value-oriented market leadership accelerated in September within non-U.S. developed and emerging markets. The broad sell-off of growth oriented stocks across emerging markets was most pronounced within China and India, as measured by the MSCI China IMI Growth and the MSCI India IMI Growth indices.

As we head into the final quarter of 2018, surveys suggest that global growth is likely to decelerate modestly into the remainder of this year. Specifically, purchasing manager surveys continue to point to deceleration in the pace of industrial orders growth and subsequent industrial production growth. Given substantial and relatively abrupt changes in U.S. trade policy, we now expect near term economic activity to slow somewhat as firms work out the new rules and adjust to the impact on their supply chains.

At the same time, we expect the growing divergence between the U.S. and other economies to begin to normalize. Specifically, in Q2 2018 the U.S. economy expanded at an annual rate of 4.2% — the rate of growth which we believe is likely to mark the cyclical high. Consistent with this high economy-wide growth rate, corporate earnings growth accelerated to 22% YoY, a decade high (excluding the post GFC bounce). Barring additional policy support, it is difficult to see U.S. corporates maintaining this rate of profit growth. If the rest of the world continues to grow at the current pace, while the U.S. economy slows marginally, the growth wedge and by extension the substantial outperformance of U.S. markets vis-à-vis the rest of the world is likely to moderate from here.

Rising U.S. yields and increasing fiscal deficits in emerging markets (EMs) have reduced U.S. dollar liquidity in 2018. More recently, higher oil prices in the wake of the U.S. re-imposing economic sanctions on Iran contribute to a more challenging macroeconomic environment for the EMs, as many are large energy importers. Beyond these broader macro headwinds, turbulence within EM equities and currencies has been largely idiosyncratic and self-inflicted: the South African government reopening the possibility of farm repossession, for example, and the upcoming presidential election in Brazil where the top two contenders are from the far-right and the far-left. Increasingly reckless economic policies in Turkey and the exposed fragility of the Indian financial system have also compounded EM underperformance versus developed markets.

On September 24th, the Trump administration implemented 10% tariffs on $200 billion worth of imported goods from China, which will increase to a rate of 25% on January 1st, 2019. This is in addition to the $50 billion of tariffs that were implemented in July and August. While the first set of tariffs was initially focused on industrial goods such as materials, machinery, and chemicals, the second round of tariffs is targeting over 5,700 consumer goods, including agricultural products, textiles, and furniture.

With the implementation of the second round of tariffs including consumer goods, we are expecting inflation from the additional tariffs to pick up in the near term. Corporations that are affected by the additional tariffs will either have to absorb the costs themselves, leading to a decrease in margins, or will pass along the additional costs to the end consumer to keep their profits intact. As cost increases are pushed to the consumer, we are expecting to see an uptick in inflation starting in 2019.

Through much of this year, China has been implementing significant and wide-spread changes in its tax structure, affecting both corporate and income taxes. Reducing taxes for households is expected to support consumer demand in China. We are not expecting China to implement a large stimulus, but slow policy changes have been made to keep growth steady. Year to date, the renminbi is down nearly 6% against the U.S. dollar. As the dollar strengthens, further depreciation cannot be ruled out.

From a portfolio strategy perspective, positioning within our ACWI-oriented funds has generally reflected our more cautious outlook, with reduced EM weightings in favor of increased developed market exposure. Within our dedicated EM funds, we have maintained overweighted positions in India and Mexico, and underweighted exposures in Korea and Taiwan. Within China, our positioning continues to emphasize domestically-oriented consumer, healthcare and technology companies that we believe are well positioned to benefit from the economy's ongoing transition to a consumption and services-driven growth model.

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