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# Yes, There is an Alternative:

## The Case for EM Asia Equities

**Krzysztof Janiga, CFA**

ETF Strategist

**Benjamin O'Dwyer**

ETF Strategist

Developed market equities have rallied, perhaps as investors saw it as their only option for finding returns in a challenging environment as bond yields fell to historic lows. However, emerging market Asia may represent an opportunity in light of relative valuations combined with economic fundamentals and COVID-19 containment.

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These are difficult times for investors seeking opportunities to generate returns. Central bank actions may have saved the economy, but at the same time they have brought government bond yields down to historic lows. To stimulate the economy and avoid an unnecessary wave of bankruptcies, lower rates and various QE measures may remain even longer than anticipated before the crisis.

Equity markets have rallied since the peak of the COVID-19 crisis in March and recovered most of the losses, partially on the back of falling bond yields and overall government support for corporates. However, in most places, equity prices have disconnected from earnings expectations and the real economy.

S&P 500 P/E remains elevated at 22.2x, with US 2020-2021 GDP expected by the IMF at -1.9 p.a.<sup>1</sup> The MSCI Europe Index trades at a P/E of 18.2x, while countries such as Spain, Germany, UK, France and Italy may not recover to their 2019 GDP levels by the end of 2021 (see Figure 2). It could be argued that developed equity markets have rallied because there is no alternative. But there might be one in EM Asia equities.

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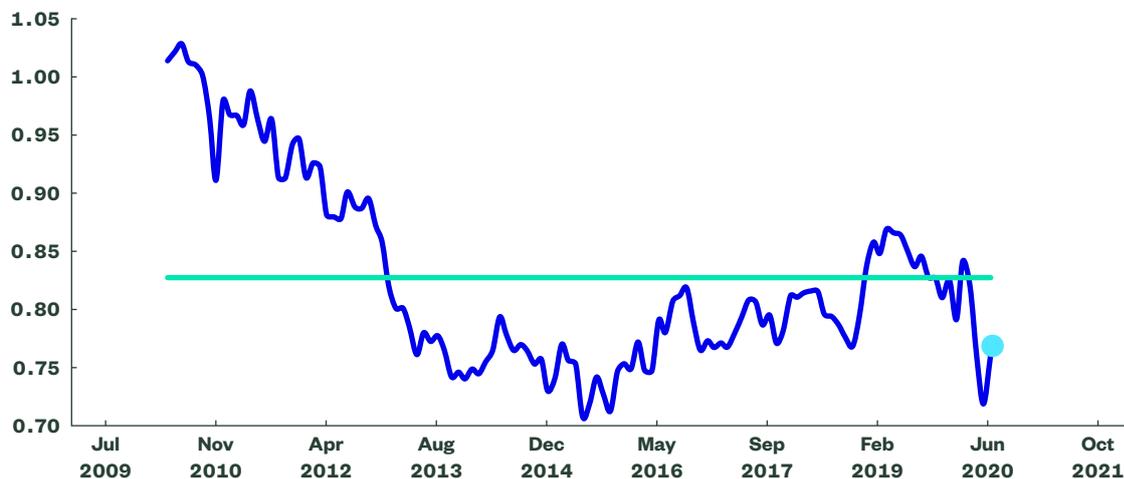
**EM Asia Equities**  
— Reasonable  
Valuations, Hidden  
in Plain Sight

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Similar to other markets, emerging market (EM) Asia equities, as represented by the MSCI Emerging Markets Asia Index, trade at a 10y high 12m forward P/E of 15.2x. However, when comparing the index to global equities, which trade at a P/E of 19.7x, the relative P/E of EM Asia of 0.77 screens undemanding. More importantly, it remains below the 10y average of 0.83, despite significantly better forecasted GDP growth numbers for EM Asia countries.

Figure 1  
**EM Asia P/E  
 Relative to Global  
 Equities Screens  
 Undemanding**

■ Relative P/E  
 ■ Average Relative P/E  
 ■ Current Relative P/E



Source: State Street Global Advisors, Bloomberg Finance L.P., as of 30 June 2020. Relative P/E is 12m forward Bloomberg BEST P/E of EM Asia represented by MSCI Emerging Asia Net Total Return USD Index divided by Bloomberg Best P/E of MSCI ACWI Net Total Return USD Index.

## Backed by the Real Economy

China, Korea and India make up 77% of the MSCI Emerging Markets Asia Index (as of 30 June 2020). According to the IMF, all three countries are expected to recover their 2019 GDP level by the end of 2021; the strongest annualised growth (4.5%) is expected from China, which represents 52% of the index. The IMF forecasts India and Korea to recover at a slower, albeit positive rate. That contrasts with a more sluggish expected recovery for the US and developed European economies, as well as with economies of some EMs outside of Asia. We believe EM Asia, with its current P/E multiple in conjunction with prospects for economic rebound, may represent a relatively attractive opportunity for equity investors.

Figure 2  
**Real GDP Growth  
 Forecasts**

GDP			Projections (%)		Projections (%)
	2018 (%)	2019 (%)	2020	2021	2020-2021 p.a.
<b>EM Asia Countries</b>					
China	6.7	6.1	1.0	8.2	4.5
India	6.1	4.2	-4.5	6.0	0.6
Korea	2.9	2.0	-2.1	3.0	0.4
Indonesia	5.2	5.0	-0.3	6.1	2.9
Malaysia	4.7	4.3	-3.8	6.3	1.1
Thailand	4.2	2.4	-7.7	5.0	-1.6
Philippines	6.3	6.0	-3.6	6.8	1.5
<b>Other Selected Countries</b>					
Brazil	1.3	1.1	-9.1	3.6	-3.0
France	1.8	1.5	-12.5	7.3	-3.1
Germany	1.5	0.6	-7.8	5.4	-1.4
Italy	0.8	0.3	-12.8	6.3	-3.7
Russia	2.5	1.3	-6.6	4.1	-1.4
Spain	2.4	2.0	-12.8	6.3	-3.7
South Africa	0.8	0.2	-8.0	3.5	-2.4
United Kingdom	1.3	1.4	-10.2	6.3	-2.3
United States	2.9	2.3	-8.0	4.5	-1.9

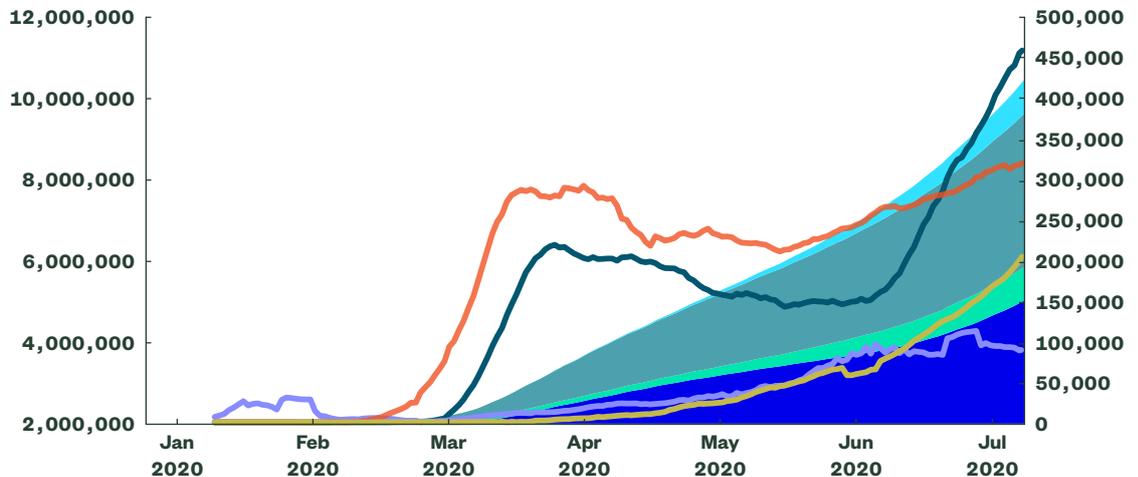
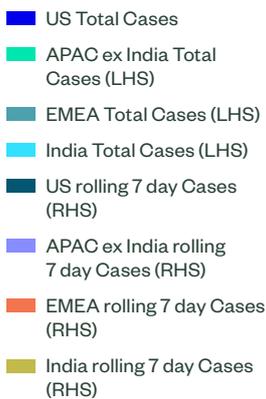
Source: International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook, June 2020 Update. Projections 2020-2021 p.a. are geometrical averages of 2020 and 2021 projections for each country, calculated by State Street Global Advisors.

## First to Emerge from the Crisis?

East Asia was the first region hit by the crisis and, except for India (which constitutes only 10% of the EM Asia Index), appears to be the first one to be emerging from it. The emergence has not come without a cost, as there were temporary shutdowns of economies. There are longer term, structural implications and the risk of new waves of the virus is still there. Nevertheless, thanks to disciplined societies and government capabilities, lockdowns in EM Asia countries seem to have been efficient when we look at new cases compared to the situation in western countries, particularly the US.

Figure 3

### Except for India, APAC Economies May Recover from COVID-19 Relatively Quickly



Source: Bloomberg Finance L.P., State Street Global Advisors as of 17 July 2020. US number of cases is NCOVUSCA INDEX; APAC ex India number of cases is NCOVAAP Index - NCOVINCA Index; EMEA number of cases is NCOVCAEM Index; India number of cases is NCOVINCA Index.

## EM Economies Have Already Started Showing Positive Signs<sup>2</sup>

**China (52% of the index)** The recent central bank policy response has been prudent but flexible. On 1 July 2020, the PBOC announced it would cut 25bp for re-lending and re-discount facilities. In total, the stimulus has so far reached 2.2 trillion yuan. In addition, there are expectations for two further rate cuts in the second half of the year, as well as deeper monetary easing stimuli. May macro data confirmed economic recovery in China.

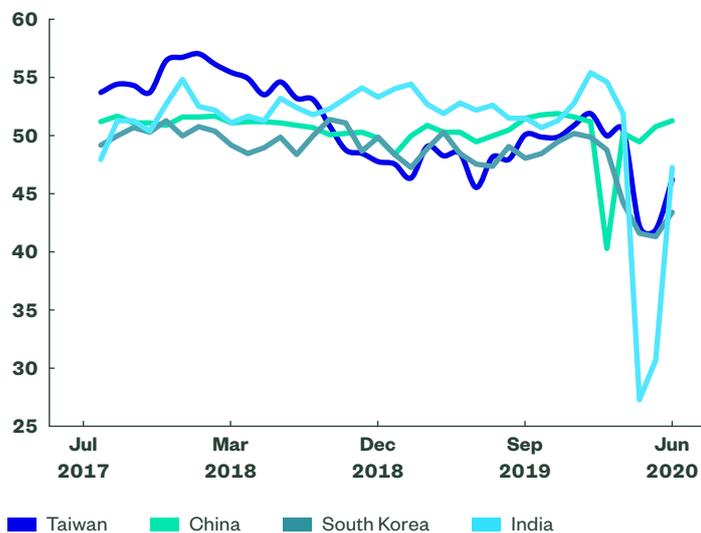
Moreover, industrial production in China continued with a solid recovery in May (+1.1% month-on-month seasonally adjusted, or 4.4% year-on-year), adding to the rebound in April and March. And finally, industrial profit returned to positive growth in May, rising 6.0% (from a previous reading of -4.3%). On the external front, China's May exports, in USD terms, held up better than expected, falling just 3.3%. Shipments to developed economies also continued to do better than expected in May. We acknowledge that there are risks related to the pandemic and the trade war, but at the same time we appreciate the resilient fundamentals of the Chinese economy.

**India (10% of the index)** India is still much further behind in the crisis than other Asian countries. However, high-frequency data is showing that a rebound in economic activity continued in June. Google mobility data shows improvement in mobility trends and essential services consumption, such as groceries and pharmacies, are now close to pre-lockdown levels. PMIs for India remain deep in contraction territory, with manufacturing recovering more quickly than services. However, they do appear to be coming off their lows, and may follow other countries in bouncing back once managers become more confident on demand from consumers.

**Korea (15% of the index)** Retail sales in Korea showed another strong monthly gain of 4.6% month-on-month, seasonally adjusted in May after rebounding 5.3% in April. Bolstered by consumption subsidies in mid-May, the gain was stronger than expected. As a result, retail sales have recovered to pre-COVID-19 levels and their growth has now turned positive on a year-on-year basis. Consumer sentiment has extended a modest recovery in June by 4.2 points to 81.8. The continuing recovery confirms the view that consumer sentiment bottomed in April.

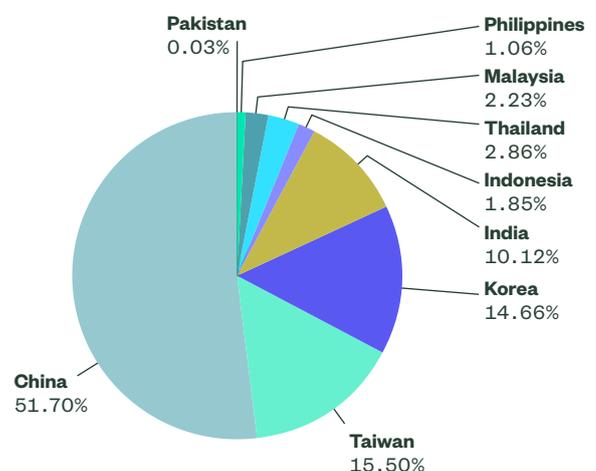
**Thailand (2% of the index)** The country has managed to keep infection rates low and stable, although this has cost the country in terms of tourism revenue. Nevertheless, Thailand's domestic mobility has been recovering since May, when the easing of local containment measures started. Successful implementation of each round of the relaxation has been made possible by persistently low community infections and a ban on inbound passenger flights to prevent imported cases. The risk to Thailand comes from closing borders, as the economy relies heavily on tourism.

Figure 4  
**Manufacturing PMI**  
**Rebounding Sharply**



Source: Bloomberg Finance L.P., as of 30 June 2020.

Figure 5  
**MSCI EM Asia Index**  
**Country Weights**



Source: FactSet as of 30 June 2020. Country breakdown is as of the date indicated, subject to change, and should not be relied upon as current thereafter.

## Sector Split Could Benefit from Structural Shifts

The MSCI EM Asia Index is much more concentrated than the S&P 500. The top 10 constituents make up 35% of the index, compared to just 27% for the S&P 500. There is also a large concentration in China, and tech dominates the index. The largest constituents are businesses that could benefit from the crisis, as the tailwinds coming from online retail, work from home and overall digitisation have accelerated.

It is worth mentioning that although consumer discretionary makes up 19% of the index, nearly half of that is Alibaba.<sup>3</sup> The company stands to benefit from the continuing adoption of Alipay, other finance services and accelerating trends in online retail.

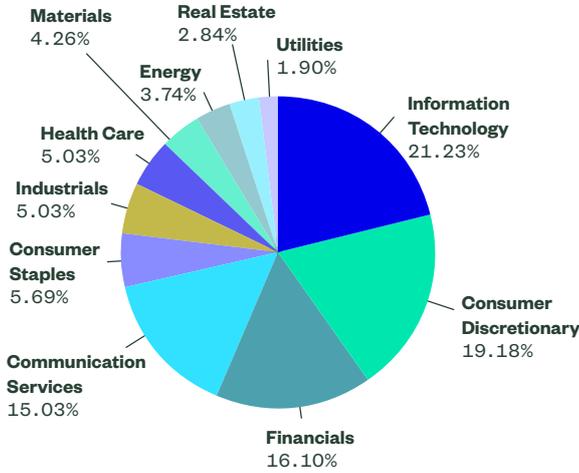
The most obvious beneficiary of the crisis is the second largest holding, Tencent.<sup>4</sup> The company is entering into its strongest game launch cycle since 2008, which could drive the acceleration of earnings growth in 2020 and into 2021.

Taiwan Semi-Conductors are also not expecting a massive hit to demand, and potentially may see growth due to new stresses put on digital capabilities from work-from-home necessities.<sup>5</sup>

Samsung has managed to avoid potential legal issues after a South Korean court declined to issue an arrest warrant for the heir to the empire following issues over corruption.<sup>6</sup> The business is also unlikely to see demand for its products drop off due to the virus and may also benefit from some of the moves to working from home.

Figure 6

**MSCI EM Asia Index Sector Breakdown**



Source: FactSet as of 30 June 2020. Sector breakdown is as of the date indicated, subject to change, and should not be relied upon as current thereafter.

Figure 7

**MSCI EM Asia Index Top 10 Companies**

Security Name	Index Weight (%)	Country	Sector
Alibaba Group Holding Ltd. Sponsored ADR	8.84	China	Consumer Discretionary
Tencent Holdings Ltd.	8.04	China	Communication Services
Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co., Ltd.	5.7	Taiwan	Information Technology
Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd.	4.57	Korea	Information Technology
Meituan Dianping Class B	1.72	China	Consumer Discretionary
China Construction Bank Corporation Class H	1.7	China	Financials
Reliance Industries Limited	1.4	India	Energy
Ping An Insurance (Group) Company of China, Ltd. Class H	1.3	China	Financials
JD.com, Inc. Sponsored ADR Class A	1.12	China	Consumer Discretionary
China Mobile Limited	0.9	China	Communication Services

Source: FactSet as of 30 June 2020. Top 10 companies table is as of the date indicated, subject to change, and should not be relied upon as current thereafter.

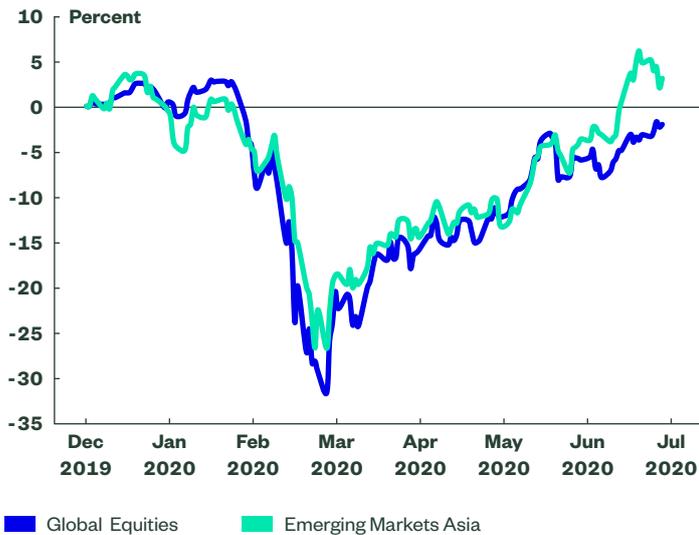
**Performance**

EM Asia has outperformed global equities year to date. However, the region has been largely neglected over the last 10 years, despite strong economic growth.

Figure 8

**EM Asia and Global Equities Year to Date Returns**

YTD Return

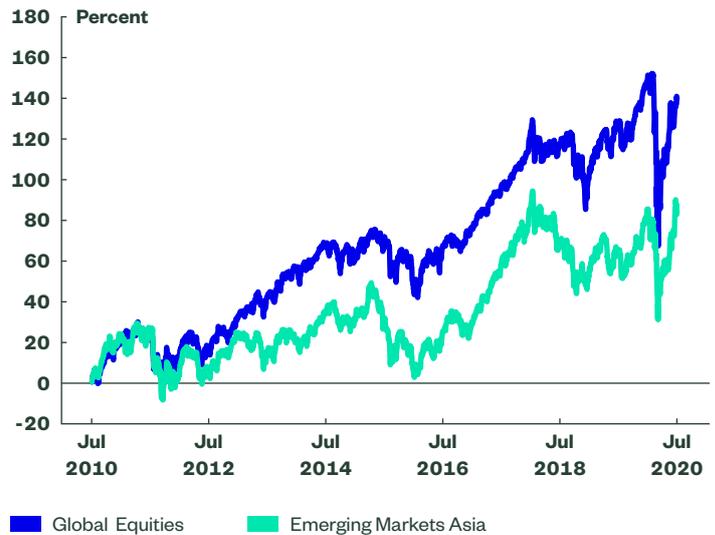


Source: Bloomberg Finance L.P., as of 17 July 2020. Global Equities is MSCI ACWI Net Total Return USD Index. EM Asia is Return is MSCI Emerging Asia Net Total Return USD Index. Bloomberg TOT\_RETURN\_INDEX\_NET\_DVDS. Past performance is no guarantee of future results.

Figure 9

**EM Asia and Global Equities 10 year Cumulative Returns**

10Y Total Return



Source: Bloomberg Finance L.P., as of 17 July 2020. Global Equities is MSCI ACWI Net Total Return USD Index. EM Asia is Return is MSCI Emerging Asia Net Total Return USD Index. Bloomberg TOT\_RETURN\_INDEX\_NET\_DVDS. Past performance is no guarantee of future results.

## How to Play this Theme?

Investors can utilize SPDR® MSCI EM Asia UCITS ETF to gain exposure to Asia emerging market equities.

Figure 10  
Fund Details

Fund Name	SPDR® MSCI EM Asia UCITS ETF
ISIN	IE00B466KX20
Share Class Currency	USD
Primary Ticker (Deutsche Börse)	SPYA GY
Other Tickers	EMAD LN, EMAS LN, EMAE FP, EMAS SE, EMAE IM, EMADN MM
TER (%)	0.55%
Index Name	MSCI EM Asia Index
Index Ticker	NDUEEGFA
No. of Index Constituents	c.910
Portfolio Construction	Optimised
Income Treatment	Accumulation
Index Description	The MSCI EM Asia Index is a free float-adjusted market capitalisation weighted index that is designed to measure the equity market performance of approximately 9 emerging markets in Asia.

Source: State Street Global Advisors as of 30 June 2020.

Figure 11  
Annualised Performance  
(%, expressed in fund's base currency)

	1 Month*	3 Month*	YTD*	1 Year	3 Year	5 Year	Since Inception 16 May 2011
SPDR MSCI EM Asia UCITS ETF	8.24	17.83	-3.63	4.31	3.56	4.38	3.18
MSCI EM Asia Index	8.24	17.82	-3.50	4.88	4.10	4.83	3.77
Difference	-0.01	0.01	-0.14	-0.57	-0.55	-0.46	-0.59

\* 1 Month, 3 Month and YTD performance numbers are not annualised.

Source: State Street Global Advisors as of 30 June 2020. Past performance is not a guarantee of future results. The Fund Net of fees do reflect commissions and costs incurred on the issue and redemption, or purchases and sale, of units. If the performance is calculated on the basis of Gross/net asset values that are not denominated in the accounting currency of the collective investment scheme, its value may rise or fall as a result of currency fluctuations. Calendar year inception performance returns will be partial for the year where the inception date for either the Fund in question or the historic performance-linked Fund (whichever is the earliest) falls within that period.

## Endnotes

- 1 P/E in this document is defined as Bloomberg 12-month forward BEST P/E. Data as of 17 July 2020.
- 2 Unless stated otherwise in the "EM Economies Have Already Started Showing Positive Signs" section. The source for the economic data for China, India, Korea and Thailand in that section is JP Morgan Research as of June 2020.
- 3 This information should not be considered a recommendation to invest in a particular sector or to buy or sell any security shown.
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