

# Separate lanes

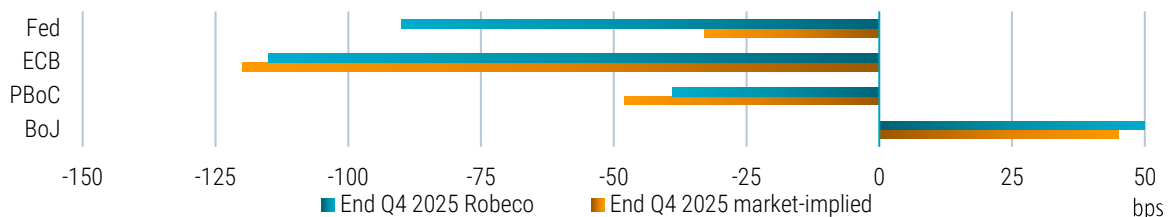
- Fed: a slower descent
- ECB: sets a path
- PBoC: fiscal friend
- BoJ: don't rock the boat

The major central banks have different trajectories in mind for their monetary policy settings in the months ahead. At their December meeting, the Fed made it clear that, while expecting further cuts, the pace of their easing steps will slow in the new year. That slowdown partly reflects uncertainty around trade tariffs and their implications for US inflation.

The same trade uncertainty is playing out differently elsewhere in the world. The PBoC for instance is grappling with another factor clouding the Chinese growth outlook, which is likely to push them toward further policy easing. For the ECB potential US trade tariffs add an additional layer of uncertainty for the growth outlook. While trade policies could also have a modest upward impact on Eurozone inflation, it still appears to be on a trajectory toward target levels. This should allow the ECB to bring rates to neutral and possibly beyond.

The BoJ has been reluctant in changing rates too rapidly and decided to keep rates on hold at their December meeting. While the pace of change remains gradual, we do expect further rate hikes from the BoJ. Economic conditions in Japan support such policy steps, and foreign trade policies should not derail this trajectory.

Figure 1 – Outlook for central banks' policy rates



Source: Bloomberg, Robeco, based on money market futures and forwards, 19 December 2024

**CENTRAL BANK WATCHER DECEMBER 2024**

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**The Federal Reserve: a slower descent**

- Downside employment risks suggest it may be too early for the Fed to abort its easing cycle
- But upside inflation risks imply a slower descent back to long-run neutral
- 5-year rates valuations look attractive, cross-market and on curve

**Skipping is not stopping**

Despite inflation remaining “somewhat elevated” and fresh upside risks from the new administration’s intended trade and fiscal policies, the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) cut the target range for the Federal Funds rate by 25 bps to 4.25%-4.50% in December. This further adjustment was aimed at forestalling risks to achieving the goal of maximum employment.

With the policy stance now “significantly less restrictive”, the Fed is not in a hurry to cut rates further. Indeed, as Chair Powell stated during the December press conference, the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) “can be more cautious about further moves” and is in “a new phase in the process”. This is corroborated by the new Economic Projection, which show that – probably due to an upward revision of the 2025 core PCE inflation projection – the median FOMC participant anticipates only 50 bps of additional easing next year (and 75 bps in the subsequent two years). The projections also showed a further uplift in the median *long-run* federal funds rate projection, from 2.875% to 3.0%.

Looking ahead, the Fed looks set to keep rates on hold at the upcoming January meeting. With lingering downside risks to employment growth and the Fed’s eagerness to engineer a soft landing, our central scenario remains for a return to ‘neutrality’ – which we pitch in the upper half of the 2.8%-3.6% central tendency of projections for the long-run Federal Funds rate – by the end of 2025.

**Table 1** - What is priced in for the Fed versus our expectations

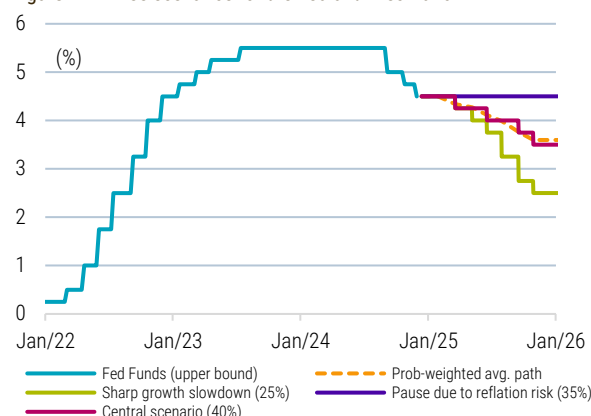
Fed funds rate (% upper bound)	4.50	Mar-25	Jun-25	Sep-25	Dec-25
Change implied by FF Futures (bps)		-14	-23	-27	-33
Our probably-weighted expectation (bps)		-16	-39	-74	-90
Our central scenario (bps)		-25	-50	-75	-100
Fed funds rate central scenario (% upper bound)		4.25	4.00	3.75	3.50

Source: Bloomberg, Robeco 19 December 2024

That said, we do acknowledge that the odds of a scenario where the Fed delivers less or refrains from cutting rates next year has gone up. In fact, we now ascribe a 35% weight to a scenario where the Fed is on hold next year. At the same time, given the recent uptick in leading economic indicators we have trimmed the chance of a hard-landing scenario under which faster easing would emerge (to 25%).

Weighing the three scenarios, our probability-weighted average Fed funds rate path is marginally below market pricing for H1 2025 (see Table 1 below) but well below markets in H2 2025.

**Figure 2** – Three scenarios for the Fed until Dec-2025



Source: Bloomberg, Robeco, 19 December 2024

**5y attractive cross-market; steepening bias**

Markets now price in a terminal policy rate of only slightly below 4%. That is more than 25 bps above the upper end of the range where most FOMC participants pitch the long-run Federal funds rate.

This suggests that there’s value in the 5-year part of the rates market, either cross-market (e.g., versus 5-year Canada or 10-year South Korea) or on the curve. Indeed, we remain more constructive on shorter-dated USTs than on 10s and 30s, as the term premium in the latter remains too low given fiscal risks.

### European Central Bank: sets a path

- ECB continues 25 bps cut per meeting
- Growth not weak enough to speed up the pace
- Levels to buy Bunds not far away

### Toward neutral

The ECB has adopted a faster pace of rate cuts since October, opting for 25 bps steps per meeting. Prior to the recent December meeting there was some expectation in the market that a 50 bps step could be considered. In the press conference Lagarde downplayed these expectations, pointing to still elevated services inflation. As a base case we expect the current pace of rate cuts to continue, bringing the depo rate down to 2.0% by June, from its current level of 3.0%.

The neutral level of rates for the Eurozone is probably not far from 2%. ECB staff estimate it to be 1.75-2.50%. As the depo rate gets closer to the 2% level, we expect any further cuts to be less 'mechanical'. Risks are tilted toward more cuts, but these should be supported by data first. Our base case puts the depo rate at 2.0%, while our probability-weighted level is closer to 1.8% for December.

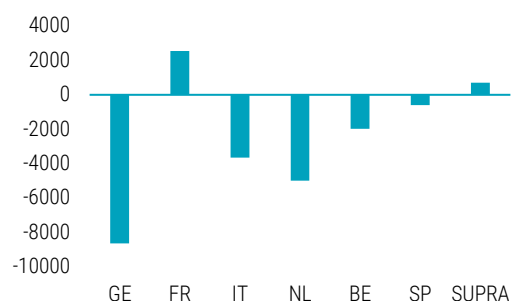
Inflation is expected to allow the ECB to ease policy. After a brief uptick in December, we expect headline inflation to return to 2% in February. For core inflation we should see a gradual descent toward 2.3% over summer. The growth outlook gently guides the ECB toward cuts. Growth has been weak in the Eurozone, but the impact on the labor market has so far remained limited. Unemployment is still at lows in southern Europe. Continued growth in the services industry is adding jobs, despite very weak manufacturing activity.

### Little ECB support expected for French OATs

As France continues to suffer from political

uncertainty, spreads of French OATs over German Bunds have remained elevated. Data on reinvestments of the PEPP portfolio show that the ECB has been offering some support to French OATs by channeling investments to this market. Still, this support is limited in size and PEPP reinvestments will cease at the end of 2024. Support for France from the ECB's Transmission Protection Instrument (TPI) should not be expected, though this should be a backstop for other markets in case of contagion from unrest in France.

Figure 3 – ECB PEPP reinvestments June-September



Source: Bloomberg, Robeco, 19 December 2024

### Bunds more attractive again after recent sell-off

German Bunds have been able to escape part of the sell-off that took place in global bonds recently. Euro rates benefited, on a relative basis, from a weaker fundamental and stricter fiscal outlook, but also from a more supportive technical. The latter was especially visible in the market for longer-dated euro swaps. For now we see little room for the ECB to deviate substantially from the line of 25 bps cuts per meeting. This path is fully priced until June and a bit beyond, which makes it difficult to be overly excited on Bunds. Still, we think it is easier to imagine the ECB going below neutral (2%) than seeing them stop much above. Hence we favor buying 10-yr Bunds from current levels of 2.3% and see a target of 2.0%.

Table 2 - What is priced in for the ECB versus our expectations

ECB deposit rate (%)	3.00	Mar-25	Jun-25	Sep-25	Dec-25
Change implied by market pricing (bps)		-60	-100	-115	-120
Our probably-weighted expectation (bps)		-50	-105	-115	-115
Our central scenario (bps)		-50	-100	-100	-100
Depo rate central scenario (%)		2.50	2.00	2.00	2.00

Source: Bloomberg, Robeco; 19 December 2024

**People’s Bank of China: fiscal friend**

- PBoC hints at broad-based easing in H1 2025
- Central bank balance sheet will support further fiscal easing
- Curve steepening beckons on supply and potential growth pick-up later in Q1

**Monetary submission**

The latest rhetoric from Chinese policymakers is pointing at more growth support from both fiscal and monetary policy. Indeed, it is not *if* but *when* additional stimulus will be rolled out in 2025.

On the fiscal side it seems authorities want to retain ammunition until clarity emerges on the tariff policies of the new US government.

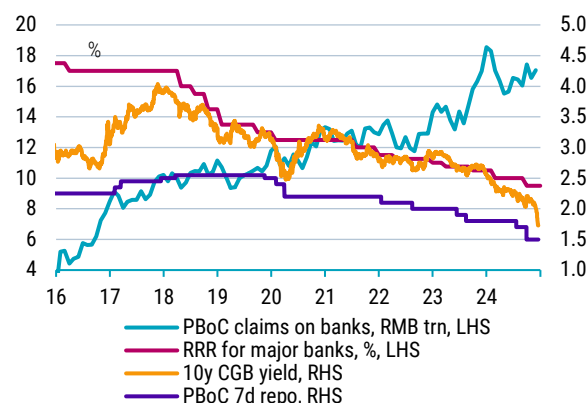
Meanwhile, with the appropriate monetary policy stance – for the first time since 2010 – classified as “moderately loose”, the PBoC looks set to cut interest rates by at least 20 bps in H1 2025 – and further cuts in the reserve requirement ratio (RRR) of commercial banks also beckon.

Core inflation, at a mere 0.30% in November, is simply too low and the signs of stabilization in home sales are not convincing enough to expect any meaningful property rebound in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the Chinese consumer remains very cautious on spending – judging from the ongoing strong appetite for banks’ time deposits.

RRR cuts will be partly aimed at helping commercial banks absorb the wave of new CGB issuance in 2025. In fact, we expect the balance sheet of the PBoC to keep expanding in the coming quarters (Figure 4). This in turn should reinforce downward pressure on the exchange rate – with CNY/USD set to break through 7.30 before long.

Financial markets are currently discounting up to 50 bps of rate easing by mid-2024 (see Table 3 below). As we expect balance sheet expansion to be the more important tool for the PBoC in 2025, we think this is overdoing it somewhat. This is the first time in a long while that we are more cautious about the market’s easing expectations.

Figure 4 – PBoC policy levers – multiple fronts



Source: Bloomberg, Robeco, 18 December 2024

**Curve steepening**

Both short-term and long-term CGB yields have rallied to fresh multi-year lows. Although we believe the *secular* downtrend in Chinese rates has not ended, we see an increased chance of underperformance of longer-dated CGBs, either cross-market or versus shorter-dated CGBs.

Specifically, we expect the 2s30s CGB curve – which has hovered between 70 and 95 bps in the past six months and currently sits at c. 80 bps – to rise to and above the upper end of this range in the course of H1 2025. The main culprits are CGB supply pressures and a projected pick-up in nominal GDP growth.

Table 3 - What is priced in for the PBoC versus our expectations

PBoC 7-day reverse repo (%)	1.50	Mar-25	Jun-25	Sep-25	Dec-25
Change implied by forwards (bps)		-27	-43	-48	-48
Our probability-weighted expectation (bps)		-17	-33	-38	-39
Our central scenario (bps)		-20	-30	-40	-40
PBoC 7-day reverse repo in central scenario (%)		1.30	1.20	1.10	1.10

Source: Bloomberg, Robeco; 18 December 2024

**Bank of Japan: don't rock the boat**

- Not hiking now, but likely later
- More structural inflation evidence needed
- Underweight JGBs and expect a flatter curve

**One data point at a time**

The BoJ opted to leave policy rates unchanged at its December Monetary Policy Meeting (MPM) but continued to signal a possibility of increasing rates further down the line. Local media had already downplayed the possibility of a hike ahead of the December meeting, as Governor Ueda pointed to factors like awaiting the 2025 Shunto wage negotiations data, expected in Q1 2025. The BoJ also released an extensive review of monetary policy decisions. They draw two important conclusions. Firstly, unconventional monetary policy (i.e. YCC and QE) cannot substitute conventional monetary policies. Secondly, the use of unconventional tools has led to long-lasting marks on the functioning of the JGB market. This should raise the bar for increasing the use of these policies going forward.

**Hard data continues to point toward a recovery**

We expect that economic data will support a further rate hiking cycle. Japanese core inflation (CPI-excluding fresh food and energy) has risen from around 2.0% to 2.3% YoY over the past couple of months, while faster-moving three-month annualized figures point to a somewhat higher pace of core inflation. We would, however, note that the majority of inflationary pressures stem from higher goods inflation and, to a lesser extent, are driven by services inflation. Wage growth has shown a material increase and is tracking levels indicated by the 2024 Shunto wage negotiations.

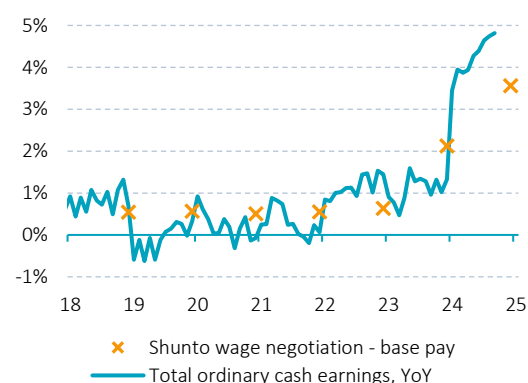
We believe the BoJ is back in play as wage growth and inflation expectations continue to show evidence of a somewhat higher inflation outlook

versus the deflationary period of the last 25 years. We would stress that an aggressive hiking cycle is unlikely, but the change in interest rates should be viewed as a return to a somewhat less accommodative policy stance that a higher inflation outlook provides. A structurally higher inflation level, of around 1.5%-2% would allow the BoJ to gradually increase the policy rate somewhat. We currently view the March meeting as the most likely candidate for a rate hike. By then there should be a clearer picture on how wages are set to progress over 2025. If wage growth starts to lead to more services-related inflation, we could see the BoJ take the policy rate to around 1% in 2026.

**Stay underweight JGBs**

Risk-reward is skewed in favor of keeping an underweight in JGBs. Our target to reduce the underweight is around a level of 1.25% in 10-year JGBs. This level corresponds with front-end rates expectations to pricing in a 1% policy rate level in two years' time. 30-year JGBs are still very directional to the overall moves in rates. Going forward, we expect the curve to become less sensitive to the outright moves in interest rates, resulting in a flattening of the 10s30s curve.

Figure 5 – Pickup in wage growth materializing



Source: Bloomberg, Robeco, 19 December 2024

Table 4 - What is priced in for the BoJ versus our expectations

Policy balance rate (%)	0.25	Mar-25	Jun-25	Sept-25	Dec-25
Change implied by OIS (bps)		23	32	40	45
Our probability-weighted expectation (bps)		21	30	34	50
Our central scenario (bps)		25	25	25	50
Policy balance rate in central scenario (%)		0.50	0.50	0.50	0.75

Source: Bloomberg, Robeco; 19 December 2024

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This document has not been registered with the Monetary Authority of Singapore ("MAS"). Accordingly, this document may not be circulated or distributed directly or indirectly to persons in Singapore other than (i) to an institutional investor under Section 304 of the SFA, (ii) to a relevant person pursuant to Section 305(1), or any person pursuant to Section 305(2), and in accordance with the conditions specified in Section 305, of the SFA, or (iii) otherwise pursuant to, and in accordance with the conditions of, any other applicable provision of the SFA. The contents of this document have not been reviewed by the MAS. Any decision to participate in the Fund should be made only after reviewing the sections regarding investment considerations, conflicts of interest, risk factors and the relevant Singapore selling restrictions (as described in the section entitled "Important information for Singapore Investors") contained in the prospectus. Investors should consult their professional adviser if you are in doubt about the stringent restrictions applicable to the use of this document, regulatory status of the Fund, applicable regulatory protection, associated risks and suitability of the Fund to your objectives. Investors should note that only the Sub-Funds listed in the appendix to the section entitled "Important information for Singapore Investors" of the prospectus ("Sub-Funds") are available to Singapore investors. The Sub-Funds are notified as restricted foreign schemes under the Securities and Futures Act, Chapter 289 of Singapore ("SFA") and invoke the exemptions from compliance with prospectus registration requirements pursuant to the exemptions under Section 304 and Section 305 of the SFA. The Sub-Funds are not authorized or recognized by the MAS and shares in the Sub-Funds are not allowed to be offered to the retail public in Singapore. The prospectus of the Fund is not a prospectus as defined in the SFA. Accordingly, statutory liability under the SFA in relation to the content of prospectuses does not apply. The Sub-Funds may only be promoted exclusively to persons who are sufficiently experienced and sophisticated to understand the risks involved in investing in such schemes, and who satisfy certain other criteria provided under Section 304, Section 305 or any other applicable provision of the SFA and the subsidiary legislation enacted thereunder. You should consider carefully whether the investment is suitable for you. Robeco Singapore Private Limited holds a capital markets services license for fund management issued by the MAS and is subject to certain clientele restrictions under such license.

**Additional information for investors with residence or seat in Spain**

Robeco Institutional Asset Management B.V., Sucursal en España with identification number W0032687F and having its registered office in Madrid at Calle Serrano 47-14<sup>o</sup>, is registered with the Spanish Commercial Registry in Madrid, in volume 19.957, page 190, section 8, sheet M-351927 and with the National Securities Market Commission (CNMV) in the Official Register of branches of European investment services companies, under number 24. The investment funds or SICAV mentioned in this document are regulated by the corresponding authorities of their country of origin and are registered in the Special Registry of the CNMV of Foreign Collective Investment Institutions marketed in Spain.

**Additional information for investors with residence or seat in South Africa**

Robeco Institutional Asset Management B.V. is registered and regulated by the Financial Sector Conduct Authority in South Africa.

**Additional information for investors with residence or seat in Switzerland**

The Fund(s) are domiciled in Luxembourg. This document is exclusively distributed in Switzerland to qualified investors as defined in the Swiss Collective Investment Schemes Act (CISA). This material is distributed by Robeco Switzerland Ltd, postal address: Josefstrasse 218, 8005 Zurich. ACOLIN Fund Services AG, postal address: Leutschenbachstrasse 50, 8050 Zürich, acts as the Swiss representative of the Fund(s). UBS Switzerland AG, Bahnhofstrasse 45, 8001 Zurich, postal address: Europastrasse 2, P.O. Box, CH-8152 Opfikon, acts as the Swiss paying agent. The prospectus, the Key Information Documents (PRIIP), the articles of association, the annual and semi-annual reports of the Fund(s), as well as the list of the purchases and sales which the Fund(s) has undertaken during the financial year, may be obtained, on simple request and free of charge, at the office of the Swiss representative ACOLIN Fund Services AG. The prospectuses are also available via the website.

**Additional information for investors with residence or seat in Taiwan**

The contents of this document have not been reviewed by any regulatory authority in Hong Kong. If you are in any doubt about any of the contents of this document, you should obtain independent professional advice. This document has been distributed by Robeco Hong Kong Limited ("Robeco"). Robeco is regulated by the Securities and Futures Commission in Hong Kong.

**Additional information for investors with residence or seat in Thailand**

The Prospectus has not been approved by the Securities and Exchange Commission which takes no responsibility for its contents. No offer to the public to purchase the Shares will be made in Thailand and the Prospectus is intended to be read by the addressee only and must not be passed to, issued to, or shown to the public generally.

**Additional information for investors with residence or seat in the United Arab Emirates**

Some Funds referred to in this marketing material have been registered with the UAE Securities and Commodities Authority ("the Authority"). Details of all Registered Funds can be found on the Authority's website. The Authority assumes no liability for the accuracy of the information set out in this material/document, nor for the failure of any persons engaged in the investment Fund in performing their duties and responsibilities.

**Additional information for investors with residence or seat in the United Kingdom**

Robeco Institutional Asset Management B.V (FRN: 977582) is authorized and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.

**Additional information for investors with residence or seat in Uruguay**

The sale of the Fund qualifies as a private placement pursuant to section 2 of Uruguayan law 18,627. The Fund must not be offered or sold to the public in Uruguay, except under circumstances which do not constitute a public offering or distribution under Uruguayan laws and regulations. The Fund is not and will not be registered with the Financial Services Superintendency of the Central Bank of Uruguay. The Fund corresponds to investment funds that are not investment funds regulated by Uruguayan law 16,774 dated 27 September 1996, as amended.