

***Global Imbalances: A Source of Strength or Weakness?***  
***By Kristin Forbes<sup>1</sup>***

*Comments at the Cato Institute 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Monetary Conference,  
Federal Reserve Policy in the Face of Crises  
November 16, 2006*

Gross capital flows into the United States totaled \$1.21 trillion in 2005. When combined with the \$427 billion which the United States sent abroad, these capital inflows funded the U.S. current account deficit of about \$790 billion.<sup>2</sup> The source of a large proportion of these capital inflows was developing economies—especially China and major oil exporters. Why are foreigners willing to invest such massive amounts of money in the U.S. economy? And perhaps even more surprising—why are countries with low levels of investment willing to send this relatively scarce resource to a capital-abundant economy instead of investing in their own countries? Understanding the motivation behind the millions of individual decisions that drive these capital inflows is critically important to understanding if this massive net transfer of capital into the United States reflects a strength or weakness of the global economy.

This debate on the risks and implications of global imbalances has been ongoing for years and a complete summary of this issue is beyond the scope of this short paper.<sup>3</sup> Using broad generalizations, the two major sides of this debate can be divided into the pessimists and optimists. Pessimists argue that the United States is accumulating debt at an unsustainable pace and that capital should flow from capital-abundant economies (such as the United States) to capital-scarce countries (such as developing economies), instead of the opposite. Optimists argue that the United States is an attractive place to invest, and that given the excess of savings (relative to investment) in the rest of the world, capital flows into the U.S. reflect an efficient functioning of capital markets. Pessimists argue that this system of global imbalances will end soon and that the denouement will be difficult for the global economy—including a sharp decline in the U.S. dollar, increase in global interest rates, and contraction in global growth. Optimists argue that this system could last indefinitely, and if it did unwind, any adjustment could be smooth, gradual and painless.

Although the two sides of this debate appear to have little in common, one key theme is a focus on the macroeconomic causes and implications of global imbalances (i.e., the drivers of current and financial accounts and the corresponding savings-investment imbalances for each of the major countries and regions). This paper takes a different approach and instead focuses on the microeconomic determinants of the capital flows underlying these massive, macroeconomic imbalances. Why are individuals around the

---

<sup>1</sup> Kristin Forbes is an Associate Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management. She was a Member of the White House's Council of Economic Advisers from 2003 to 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics ignore statistical discrepancies. Data from Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Survey of Current Business*, September, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See Cline (2005) or Frankel (2006) for recent summaries of this debate.

world on track to invest over \$1.2 trillion in the United States in 2006? Understanding exactly why individuals from other countries choose to invest in the United States is critical to evaluate if the current global imbalances are a risk, as well as how the imbalances might unwind.

This paper begins by discussing one factor that is not a major driver of capital flows into the United States: high realized returns. Then it discusses six possible reasons why private sector investors around the world might chose to invest in the United States instead of in their own economies, despite earning lower returns than the U.S. earns on its foreign investments. Most of these reasons reflect an efficient functioning of global financial markets. Empirical analysis is needed to evaluate which, if any, of these factors are important drivers of capital flows into the United States. The answer will help resolve whether the system of global imbalances is a strength or weakness of today's global financial system.

### **Higher Realized Returns Do Not Drive U.S. Capital Inflows**

When U.S. policymakers discuss the sustainability of the capital inflows currently funding the U.S. current account deficit, they frequently describe the United States as an attractive investment opportunity for foreigners. For example, while Secretary of the U.S. Treasury Department, John W. Snow stated: "Today we are in a situation where sound, growth-enhancing policies in the U.S. have made it an extremely attractive place to invest."<sup>4</sup> Most people interpret "an attractive place to invest" as implying high expected returns on investment. If foreigners did earn higher returns from investing in the United States than in their own countries (or other major economies), than it would be less surprising that they were willing to send \$1.2 trillion per year to the United States. Moreover, since investors show evidence of chasing returns, a history of earning high returns from investing in the United States could support continued capital inflows to support this system of global imbalances—at least as long as the returns continued to be higher than for other investment opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

Estimates of the returns that foreigners have earned from investing in the United States recently, however, suggest that this is not the case. Table 1 shows the returns foreigners earned on their U.S. investments each year since 2001, compared to the returns that the United States earned on its investments abroad.<sup>6</sup> The data show that in four of the last five years, foreigners have earned lower returns on their investments in the United States than the United States has earned on its investments abroad. More specifically, between 2001 and 2005, foreigners earned an annual return of -1.3% on their U.S. investments, as

---

<sup>4</sup> Prepared Remarks at Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs in London, England on November 17, 2004. Available at: <http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/js2105.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> For evidence on chasing returns, see Sirri and Tufano (1998).

<sup>6</sup> Several other papers have used different data sets and/or different time periods to show that foreigners have earned lower returns on their U.S. assets than the United States has earned on its foreign asset holdings. For example, see Gourinchas and Rey (2006), Lane and Milesi-Ferretti (2006) and Cline (2005).

compared to a +2.7% return the United States earned on its investments abroad.<sup>7</sup> Excluding the tumultuous year of 2001, the differences are even starker. From 2002 to 2005, foreigners earned an annual return of -0.1% on their U.S. assets, while the United States earned an annual return of +6.4% on its foreign assets.

**Table 1: Total Return on Investment Positions (in percent)**

	<b>Foreign Assets in the United States</b>	<b>U.S. Assets Abroad</b>
2001	-5.7	-12.3
2002	-9.1	-6.2
2003	5.6	16.0
2004	3.8	10.2
2005	-0.9	5.6
<i>Annual average:</i>		
2001-2005	-1.3	2.7
2002-2005	-0.1	6.4

*Notes:* FDI at market value. Returns calculated as  $\ln(V_t - F_t / V_{t-1})$  with  $V_t$  the market value of the asset or liability at the end of period  $t$ ,  $V_{t-1}$  the market value of the asset or liability at the end of period  $t-1$ , and  $F_t$  the flow of new investment over period  $t$ .

*Source:* Based on data from BEA website, [http://www.bea.gov/bea/di/intinv05\\_t3.xls](http://www.bea.gov/bea/di/intinv05_t3.xls).

One possible explanation for this lower rate of return for foreigners—and an explanation that would still be consistent with a continuation of strong capital inflows—is that a large portion of U.S. capital inflows reflect official sector purchases of U.S. assets that are made for reasons other than expected returns. For example, as discussed in Dooley, Folkerts-Landau and Garber (2003), foreign governments may purchase U.S. assets in order to maintain undervalued exchange rates and/or to accumulate low-risk reserve assets. The data indicate, however, that the share of U.S. capital inflows from foreign governments is relatively small—especially when considered as a share of gross (instead of net) capital flows. The Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that in 2005, only \$199 billion of the \$1,212 billion gross capital inflow to the United States was from foreign official entities.<sup>8</sup> According to these statistics, about 85 percent of gross U.S. capital inflows reflected private sector investments. Even though these statistics probably do not fully capture all capital inflows from government entities, they do suggest that understanding what motivates private sector capital inflows is critical to understanding what drives aggregate capital flows into the United States.

<sup>7</sup> Even after removing the effect of exchange rate movements on returns, foreigners earned substantially less on their U.S. investments than the United States earned on its investments abroad.

<sup>8</sup> Tracking exactly which capital inflows correspond to government entities is difficult because many government purchases of U.S. assets occur through private sector agencies. These statistics may therefore underreport the size of official purchases of U.S. assets.

Moreover, even after removing investments made by the official sector (at least as much as possible given existing data), foreigners continued to earn lower returns from investing in the United States than the United States earned from investing abroad. The top line of Table 2 reports that the average annual return on foreign, non-official sector investment in the United States from 2001 to 2005 was -1.7%, as compared to +1.3% on U.S. private sector investments abroad. Therefore, excluding investments made by governments and other official entities does not appear to explain the return differential on foreign investments in the United States versus U.S. investments abroad.

A second popular explanation for this return differential is the different composition of foreign investments in the United States versus U.S. investments abroad. Foreigners that invest in the United States may prefer assets with lower volatility, despite lower average returns, while U.S. investors may prefer assets with a higher risk and corresponding higher average returns. Gourinchas and Rey (2006) describe the United States as a “venture capitalist”, because its assets tend to be concentrated in shorter-term, higher return assets such as equity and FDI, while foreigners tend to hold a larger share of their portfolio in longer-term, lower-return assets (such as bank loans and debt). Lane and Milesi-Ferretti (2006) discuss this “hedge fund” characteristic of the United States (and many other industrial countries) in the sense that it is “long in foreign equity and short in foreign debt”.

**Table 2: Total Return on Private Sector Investment Positions (in percent)**

	<b>Foreign Assets in the United States</b>	<b>U.S. Assets Abroad</b>
<i>Annual Average: 2001-2005</i>		
Overall Investment Position	-1.7	1.3
FDI <sup>1</sup>	-3.9	-0.1
Corporate Bonds <sup>2</sup>	0.9	2.0
Equities	-1.0	4.1
<i>Annual Average: 2002-2005</i>		
Overall Investment Position	-0.5	4.8
FDI <sup>1</sup>	-1.3	5.3
Corporate Bonds <sup>2</sup>	0.4	2.5
Equities	2.3	10.9

*Notes:* Private sector refers to “non-official” asset positions for foreign-owned assets in the United States. Returns calculated as  $\ln(V_t - F_t / V_{t-1})$  with  $V_t$  the market value of the asset or liability at the end of period  $t$ ,  $V_{t-1}$  the market value of the asset or liability at the end of period  $t-1$ , and  $F_t$  the flow of new investment over period  $t$ .

(1) FDI at market value.

(2) Corporate bonds include government bonds for U.S. asset holdings (but not foreign assets in the United States).

*Source:* Calculations based on data from Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Survey of Current Business*, Table F.1. From July edition from 1996 through 2006.

Although the different composition of U.S. investments abroad and foreign investments in the United States explains a portion of the return differentials, this is not the entire story. Table 2 reports average annual returns on U.S. and foreign private-sector investments in FDI, corporate bonds and equities from 2001 to 2005 and from 2002 to 2005. The table shows that even within specific asset classes, private sector investors from outside the United States have been earning significantly lower returns on their U.S. assets than U.S. private sector investors have earned on their foreign holdings. For example, from 2002 to 2005, foreign private sector investors earned -1.3% annually on their FDI investments in the United States, while U.S. private sector investors earned +5.3% on their foreign FDI investments. Foreign investors earned only +0.4% on their corporate bond holdings and +2.3% on their equity holdings, while U.S. investors earned +2.5% and +10.9%, respectively. Moreover, U.S. capital inflows in these asset classes comprise a substantial portion of total U.S. capital inflows. In 2005, 11% of U.S. gross capital inflows from outside the official sector was in the form of FDI, 8% was in corporate stocks, and 38% was in corporate (and other) bonds.<sup>9</sup> Only 20% of gross capital inflows reflected purchases of U.S. Treasury securities—the traditional “safe haven” asset.

Therefore, even after controlling for the effects of government purchases and the different compositions of U.S. and foreign assets, foreigners have recently earned disappointing returns on their U.S. investments. Why were foreign, private sector investors willing to invest \$585 billion in U.S. corporate bonds, equities and FDI in 2005—despite consistently earning lower returns than U.S. private sector investors earned from the same types of assets abroad? Have foreigners been too optimistic about the “attractiveness” of investing in the United States? If so, once they realize that they could have earned higher returns from investing outside the United States, will U.S. capital inflows suddenly decline? Or do factors other than realized returns support foreign investment in the United States?

### **Factors that Might Drive U.S. Capital Inflows**

There are at least six reasons why foreign, private sector investors may choose to purchase U.S. assets, despite earning relatively lower returns. In fact, most of these reasons reflect optimal investment decisions by foreigners and could support a continuation of strong capital flows into the United States.

First, countries with less developed financial markets and limited domestic investment opportunities may invest in the United States in order to benefit from its more highly developed, liquid, and efficient financial sector. Caballero, Farhi and Gourinchas (2006) and Mendoza, Quadrini and Ríos-Rull (2006) have developed detailed models showing how different levels of financial market development in different regions, combined with financial market integration, can yield patterns of global imbalances similar to those

---

<sup>9</sup> Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Survey of Current Business*, Table F.1. (Sept. 2006). The remaining capital inflows were largely in U.S. banking liabilities.

observed today. Simulations in these papers also predict that these imbalances could persist for an extended period of time.

A second potential driver of foreign investment in the United States is its strong corporate governance, accounting standards and institutions. All of these characteristics will increase the expected returns to holding U.S. assets, such as by lowering the risk of expropriation or fraud and increasing investors' knowledge of the value of specific investments. Several papers have shown that corporate governance, accounting standards and other institutions are significant determinants of capital flows.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the strong institutions, accounting standards, and corporate governance in the United States may make the country an "attractive" place for foreigners to invest, despite lower realized returns.

A third (and related) set of factors potentially driving capital flows into the United States are the low information costs and familiarity of the United States for foreign investors. Several papers provide empirical evidence that investors prefer stocks that are "closer"—with closeness measured not only by geographic distance, but also by "connectivity" through telephone traffic, tourism, language, immigration, common newspapers and journals, etc.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the "familiarity" of the United States to investors around the world and the ease of access to information about the United States could stimulate investment by foreigners.

A fourth reason why foreign investors may purchase U.S. assets—despite relatively low returns—is the reserve status of the U.S. dollar. Investors may seek to hold a certain share of their assets in U.S. dollars in order to increase the liquidity of their portfolio—especially during periods of market volatility. Portes and Rey (1998) discuss the liquidity discount for the issuer of international currency. Granted, U.S. assets are not the only assets denominated in U.S. dollars, but this premium for dollar-denominated assets could increase the overall demand for U.S. assets and reduce the expected return that foreigners would require to invest in the United States.

A fifth factor potentially driving U.S. capital inflows is that when investors construct their portfolios, they are not just focusing on returns in the United States versus in other countries, but instead are seeking to maximize the expected returns on their entire portfolios. If returns in the United States are not perfectly correlated with returns in other countries, investors will hold U.S. assets in order to receive the benefits of diversification—even if the returns on U.S. assets are lower and the variance is higher than on other assets. More specifically, according to standard finance models, if investors care only about the mean and variance of the real return of their invested wealth, if markets are efficient, and if barriers to cross-border investment are small, then investors should hold the world market portfolio. U.S. equity market capitalization was \$17.0

---

<sup>10</sup> For example, see Daude and Fratzscher (2006), Aggarwal, Klapper and Wyszocki (2005), and Gelos and Wei (2005).

<sup>11</sup> For example, see Portes, Rey and Oh (2001), Daude and Fratzscher (2006), and Ahearne, Grier, and Warnock (2004).

trillion at the end of 2005, comprising about 39% of world equity market capitalization.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, foreigners would be predicted to hold about 39% of their global equity portfolios in U.S. equities. In fact, foreigners held only about 8% of their equity portfolios in U.S. equities.<sup>13</sup> An extensive literature has documented this home bias and discussed reasons why investors around the world tend to underweight foreign assets in their portfolios.<sup>14</sup> As barriers to cross-border investment continue to fall, however, it is likely that home bias will also fall. This could support continued capital inflows into the United States as foreigners increase their holdings of U.S. assets in order to optimize the expected returns on their portfolios.<sup>15</sup>

A final (and more speculative) factor that might possibly support foreign purchases of U.S. assets, despite earning lower returns than U.S. investors have earned abroad, is that U.S.-based investors have some type of advantage that helps them earn higher returns than their foreign counterparts. Some individuals (although not this author) might explain this by drawing on cultural differences that help U.S. investors earn higher average returns. Hausmann and Sturzenegger (2006) have explained this through “dark matter”—such as the intangible assets (ideas, blueprints and knowledge) that U.S. investors provide through their foreign direct investment. A related possibility is that being based in the United States provides certain advantages—such as through the large size of the U.S. investor network, the large number of investment conferences held in the United States, and the heavy information flow during U.S. market hours. Although this series of explanations is less compelling and has less empirical support than the other possible explanations discussed above, it is possible that being based in the United States provides certain advantages for some types of investors, and this could explain a portion of the return differentials.

## Conclusions

Foreigners investing in the United States have earned significantly lower returns since 2001 than U.S. investors have earned from investing abroad. This pattern persists even after removing official sector investment (as much as possible given data limitations) and focusing only on private sector investment. This pattern even persists for private sector investment within specific assets classes—such as for investment in equities, foreign direct investment, and bonds. Will foreigners continue to invest \$1.2 trillion per year in the United States, funding its massive current account deficit, when they could be earning

---

<sup>12</sup> Source: Standard and Poor’s, *Global Stock Markets Factbook* (2006).

<sup>13</sup> The 8% is calculated as: (\$2.1 trillion of foreign holdings of U.S. equities) / (\$25.7 total foreign equity holdings). Total foreign equity holdings calculated as: (\$43.6 trillion world equity market capitalization) – (\$3.1 trillion U.S. holdings of foreign equities) - (\$14.9 trillion U.S. holdings of domestic equities). Source of data on foreign holdings of U.S. equities and U.S. holdings of foreign equities: Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Survey of Current Business*, Table F.1. (Oct. 2006). Source of data on market capitalization: Standard and Poor’s, *Global Stock Markets Factbook* (2006).

<sup>14</sup> See Kho, Stulz and Warnock (2006) for a recent summary of this literature.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that U.S. investors also exhibit a substantial amount of home bias. Therefore, a reduction in home bias around the world could generate a greater increase in capital outflows by U.S. investors than capital inflows from foreign investors, thereby leading to a larger U.S. capital account surplus.

higher returns from investing in their own countries? Will foreigners suddenly wake up and realize the low relative rates of return they have been earning on their U.S. assets—and respond by withdrawing their money and causing a collapse of the dollar and spike in U.S. interest rates?

This paper proposes several reasons why the lower relative rates of return that foreigners have earned on their U.S. investments might reflect optimal decisions in efficient capital markets. Foreign investment in the United States might reflect any (or all) of six factors: the more developed, liquid and efficient U.S. financial markets; the strong corporate governance, accounting standards and transparency in the United States; the low information costs and familiarity of U.S. investments; the reserve status of the U.S. dollar; the diversification benefit from U.S. financial markets; and/or the locational advantages of being an investor based in the United States. For any of these reasons, foreign capital flows into the United States might reflect optimal, portfolio-maximization decisions that would not change in the next few years—despite low realized rates of return for foreigners holding U.S. assets.

But are any of these six potential explanations important in practice? Or have foreigners consistently underestimated the returns from holding U.S. assets? Careful empirical work is needed to assess which, if any, of these factors drives a significant portion of capital flows into the United States.<sup>16</sup> The answer will determine if these U.S. capital inflows and the current system of global imbalances can be expected to continue, and if not, how quickly it could unwind. The answer will also determine if this system of massive global financial transfers to one of the world's wealthiest economies represents a strength of the global financial system—or its greatest vulnerability.

## References

Aggarwal, Reena, Leora Klapper, and Peter Wysocki (2005). “Portfolio Preferences of Foreign Institutional Investors.” *Journal of Banking and Finance* 29: 2919-46.

Ahearne, Alan, William Grier, and Francis Warnock. (2004). “Information Costs and Home Bias: An Analysis of U.S. Holdings of Foreign Equities.” *Journal of International Economics* 62: 313-36.

Caballero, Ricardo, Emmanuel Farhi, and Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas. (2006). “An Equilibrium Model of ‘Global Imbalances’ and Low Interest Rates.” NBER Working Paper #11996.

Cline, William. (2005). *The United States as a Debtor Nation*. Washington, DC: Institute of International Economics and Center for Global Development.

---

<sup>16</sup> Forbes (2007) provides an empirical assessment of the relative importance of these different factors in driving U.S. capital inflows.

Daude, Christian and Marcel Fratzscher (2006). "The Pecking Order of Cross-Border Investment." European Central Bank Working Paper #590.

Dooley, Michael, David Folkerts-Landau and Peter Garber. (2003). "An Essay on the Revived Bretton Woods System." NBER Working Paper #9971.

Forbes, Kristin (2007). "Why do Foreigners Really Invest in the United States?" Unpublished mimeo, MIT.

Frankel, Jeffrey. (2006). "Global Imbalances and Low Interest Rates: An Equilibrium Model vs. A Disequilibrium Reality." Faculty Working Paper Series #RWP06-035. Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government. August.

Gelos, R. Gaston and Shang-Jin Wei. (2005). "Transparency and International Portfolio Holdings." *The Journal of Finance* 60(6): 2987-3020.

Gourinchas, Pierre-Olivier and Hélène Rey. (2006). "From World Bank to World Venture Capitalist: U.S. External Adjustment and the Exorbitant Privilege." In Richard Clarida, ed. *G7 Current Account Imbalances: Sustainability and Adjustment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming.

Hausmann, Ricardo, and Frederico Sturzenegger. (2006). "Global Imbalances or Bad Accounting? The Missing Dark Matter in the Wealth of Nations." CID Working Paper No. 124. Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Kho, Bong-Chan, René Stulz, and Francis Warnock. (2006). "Financial Globalization, Governance, and the Evolution of Home Bias." NBER Working Paper #12389.

Lane, Philip and Gian Maria Milesi-Ferretti. (2006). "The External Wealth of Nations Mark II: Revised and Extended Estimates of Foreign Assets and Liabilities, 1970-2004." IMF Working Paper #WP/06/69.

Mendoza, Enrique, Vincenzo Quadrini, and José-Víctor Ríos-Rull. (2006). "Financial Integration, Financial Deepness and Global Imbalances." University of Maryland, unpublished mimeo.

Portes, Richard and Hélène Rey. (1998) "The Emergence of the Euro as an International Currency." *Economic Policy* April: 305-43.

Portes, Richard, Hélène Rey and Yonghyup Oh. (2001). "Information and Capital Flows: The Determinants of Transactions in Financial Assets." *European Economic Review* 45: 783-96.

Sirri, Erik R. and Peter Tufano. (1998). "Costly Search and Mutual Fund Flows." *Journal of Finance* 53(5): 1589-1622.