



## When a flow becomes a flood

The deep causes of the financial crisis lie in global imbalances—mainly, America's huge current-account deficit and China's huge surplus

ASK people what caused the financial and economic crisis and most are likely to plump for some mix of greed and incompetence. Bank bosses have been castigated for fee-seeking gluttony, reckless lending and failure to heed the risks to their institutions. Regulators have been accused of sleeping on watch. Central bankers once lionised for mastering inflation and the business cycle are feted no longer.

Few among the public would be likely to pin the blame on "global imbalances": the pattern of large, persistent current-account deficits in America and, to a lesser extent, Britain and some other rich economies, matched by surpluses in emerging markets, notably China. The damage done to the financial system by lax controls, rotten incentives and passive regulation is plain. Yet underlying the whole mess was the deeper problem of imbalances. A growing number of policymakers and academics believe that these lay at the root of the financial crisis.

Economists had long feared that America would ruin itself on foreign borrowing. The current account, which measures the balance of investment and saving, has been in the red every year since 1992. Until 1997, the annual saving shortfall was modest but it grew steadily thereafter, reaching a peak of \$788 billion, or 6% of GDP, in

2006. America needed to borrow from abroad or to sell assets—shares, bonds, property—to pay for the string of deficits. Deficits need not be ruinous, especially if they finance profitable investment. But economists worried that as America's consumption boom took it deeper into hock, foreigners would become less willing to lend to it. That could lead to an abrupt halt to financing and a plunge in the dollar.

### Puzzles and explanations

The deficits reflected a falling saving rate rather than a rising investment rate. To finance this, America was sucking in savings from abroad that could not be relied on for ever. The dollar started to decline gradually from 2002 but the current-account deficit only got bigger. There were other puzzles: long-term interest rates ought to have picked up to reflect the scarcity of American savings and the concern about the dollar. But even when the Federal Reserve started to raise short-term rates from the middle of 2004, long rates declined. The chairman of the Fed, Alan Greenspan, told Congress in February 2005 that this was a "conundrum".

This spurred new thinking on global imbalances, which sought to rationalise why poor countries were so willing to send their savings to rich countries such as

America and Britain. Ben Bernanke, now the Fed's chairman, then a governor, argued in 2005 that America's low saving was a passive response to a global "saving glut" washing onto its shores. It was not that America had lapped up foreign capital; rather capital had been thrust upon it. The money flooding in from willing foreign savers had bid up government-bond prices, lowering interest rates and lifting house prices. That encouraged Americans to run down savings and to keep spending.

As academics found fresh theories to explain the saving glut, they became less anxious about the imbalances it produced. The most developed financial markets were found in America, so it was the natural destination for foreign savers seeking safe returns. It could not run deficits for ever but the day of reckoning might be years away. Americans earned far higher returns on their investments abroad than foreigners did on their American assets. That and a weaker dollar helped to slow the increase in foreign indebtedness.

Both the old-school worrywarts and the new-school optimists got some elements of the story right and others wrong. "The dollar crisis that was predicted by the central view is the only one that hasn't happened," says Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas of the University of California, Berkeley. In the depths of the financial crisis in October, the dollar rallied against most currencies. America was not cut off from external funding. But equally there was a crisis—as the pessimists foresaw—and one that has undermined a pillar of the optimists' thinking on imbalances: that America is a beacon of financial stability.

There are signs of a consensus emerg- ►►

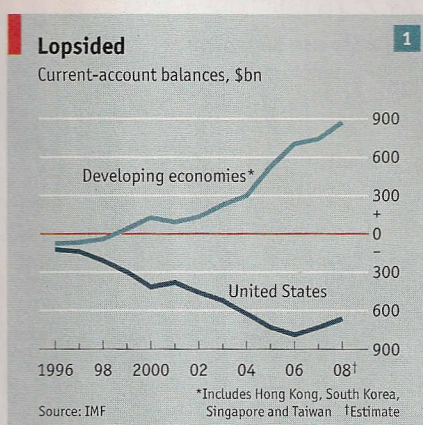
ing from these two schools. A growing band of economists agree that the forces behind the saving flows from emerging markets are likely to persist. The continuing thirst for dollar assets, albeit of the right sort, suggests that America remains a magnet for global capital. But the belief that its financial system can handle huge saving flows indefinitely has been punctured. Kenneth Rogoff of Harvard University, who had given warning of an eventual reckoning, believes that with \$800 billion of net capital flows pouring into the United States in a year, some slippage of regulatory and lending standards was perhaps inevitable. The worry now is that if imbalances are not tacked, they may in time breed another calamity.

The size of the saving glut is staggering. In 1996, the year before the Asian financial crisis began, economies designated by the IMF as emerging, developing and newly industrialised ran a collective current-account deficit of \$78 billion. Over the next decade this turned into a surplus of several hundred billion dollars (see chart 1), with China and oil exporters accounting for almost all of the increase in the past three or four years. Much of the turnaround is mirrored in a widening American deficit. (The world's sums do not add up. Statisticians are unable to offset the recent burgeoning surpluses with deficits elsewhere: according to the IMF, in 2007 the surpluses exceeded the deficits by \$265 billion.)

**The glut and the gap**

What persuades developing countries to export capital to the rich world that might be better used at home? Influences on saving vary from region to region. The income of oil-exporting countries, for instance, has ballooned since 2004 because of higher prices for crude. It would have been neither feasible nor wise for oil-rich nations to spend this windfall at home, so much of it was saved and sent abroad. Economists who have looked for something that unifies the saving behaviour of a disparate group of countries, from oil-exporters to metal-bashers, have converged on one important motive: the need to acquire reliable stores of value that can be sold easily when trouble strikes.

This idea has been developed in a series of papers by Ricardo Caballero of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Emmanuel Farhi of Harvard University and Berkeley's Mr Gourinchas. Their thesis is that emerging countries cannot create enough trustworthy saving vehicles to keep up with the pace of economic growth, because their financial markets are immature. Householders cannot rely on a ready supply of credit—or on government safety nets—so must save hard for a rainy day. But the domestic supply of financial assets is unreliable so the thrifty plump for foreign assets instead. America

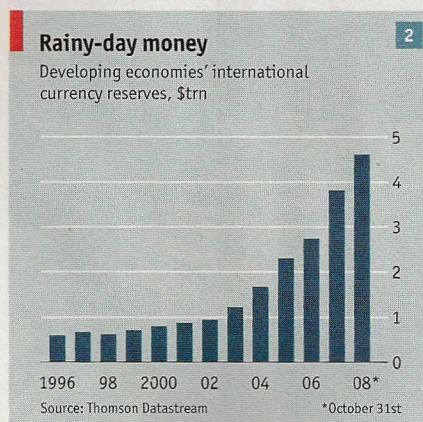


is the favoured place because it has broad and liquid markets for securities.

That interpretation sits awkwardly with another: that excess saving, particularly in China, is the result of exchange-rate policy. Emerging-market central banks have bought dollars to weaken their own currencies. That encourages exports and depresses spending at home. The result is a high level of net national saving, much of which ends up in central banks' foreign-exchange reserves. These rainy-day funds have swollen since 2004, mostly because of increased hoarding by oil-exporters and by China (see chart 2). How can this reflect private saving?

Mr Gourinchas doubts that depressing the exchange rate could sustain a high rate of saving for long. By flooding the foreign-exchange market with their own money, central banks risk driving up inflation which would erode the gain in competitiveness from a cheap currency. China has avoided that fate because it has been able to "sterilise" its currency interventions by selling bonds to banks, companies and households. That would be an expensive operation, says Mr Gourinchas, were it not for demand for savings. The reserves are collateral for the bonds held privately.

That may be too neat an explanation. In China's tightly controlled financial system, savers have little choice. And firms, not households, account for the recent rise in net national saving. There is another puzzle:



zle: why have emerging-market currency reserves grown so large? This was largely a reaction to the painful memory of the Asian crisis: Asian countries wanted to insure themselves against another sudden flight of capital. Reserves need to be large enough to draw upon if foreign-currency financing suddenly dries up, and to ensure that trade flows smoothly. But reserve holdings in some emerging markets have gone way beyond levels suggested by prudential rules of thumb—enough to pay for three months of imports, say, or to cover short-term foreign-currency debt.

Research by Maurice Obstfeld of Berkeley, Alan Taylor of the University of California, Davis, and Jay Shambaugh of Dartmouth College views these "excess" reserves as insurance for the domestic banking system. They argue that in economies with managed exchange rates and fast-growing bank deposits, there is increased risk of a "double drain". When crisis hits, fear of devaluation could spark a rush out of bank deposits into cash, and from cash into hard currency. Reserves are not only a prudent safeguard against a "sudden stop" in foreign finance. They are also needed as insurance against the risk of "sudden flight" by domestic savers.

The authors found that a measure of financial depth—the ratio of broad money to GDP—helped to explain the size of reserves. In a more recent study they found that countries with insufficient reserves to insure their financial systems suffered bigger currency crashes during last year's turmoil. The currencies of countries with full war chests did not depreciate; some rose. If economies draw the lesson that their reserves were not big enough, global imbalances will be even harder to tackle.

Mr Taylor reckons the policy of accumulating reserves accounts for a significant and growing fraction of global surpluses—enough (in the early years of this decade) to finance as much as a third of America's current-account deficit. The self-insurance against financial fragility is part of a more general bent towards precautionary saving in the developing world. If it persists, as seems likely, it will throw the problem of deficient global demand back to America.

An unsatisfying implication of the literature on the saving glut is that it paints America as a tragic victim of forces beyond its control (though some of the authors insist this is not their belief). The emerging markets' need for insurance, in its many guises, drives them to export capital to America (and to similar places, such as Britain). America, by implication, has no choice but to make room for it.

In fact, Asian savings may have provided the rope; but America hanged itself. The macroeconomic forces that drove the capital flows were hard to reverse. But what made them so devastating was that they ▶▶