Global Cycles: Capital Flows, Commodities, and Sovereign Defaults, 1815–2015†

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Capital flow cycles and commodity price swings, as well as fluctuations in international interest rates, have long been connected with economic crises, especially but not exclusively, in emerging markets. Narratives of capital flow surges that end badly have been around since the nineteenth century, if not earlier (see Sutter 1990). However, the sparse historical data on cross-border transactions in financial assets has made it difficult to systematically connect the timing of economic crises to the availability of international capital, especially in the pre-World War II era. This paper takes a step toward filling that gap. We provide a first pass at dating turning points in global capital flow and real commodity price cycles across approximately two centuries. Because of the significant variation across time and countries in the phenomenon we study and in the availability and quality of the data, our methodology is (by necessity) eclectic.

There is a substantial time-series literature about commodity prices across decades and sometimes centuries; but we are not aware of a comparable unified treatment of the recurring booms and busts in cross-border capital flows at the global level. Our contribution is to study the global cycle of capital flows over the very long run. We also touch on the connection between the commodity price super-cycle and the ebb and flow of financial capital, although the issue is studied in more detail in a companion paper (Reinhart, Reinhart, and Trebesch 2016). The impact of global economic cycles is highly relevant today, since much of the emerging world faces a sobering reversal of a double bonanza in capital inflows and primary commodity prices. By our measurement, the trough in both commodity and capital flow cycle dates to 1999 and the peak came in 2011, followed by a severe bust. This boom episode was the second longest boom in real commodity prices since the late eighteenth century and one of the four longest capital flow booms since 1815. Not surprisingly given the historical context, this “double bust” in commodities and capital flows was associated with a 2 percentage point markdown in the IMF’s recent forecast for 2015 growth in emerging markets, from 6 percent to 4 percent.

We are also interested in the nexus between the end of capital flow bonanzas and economic crises, specifically sovereign defaults. Before the widespread use of fiat money (which popularized currency crashes and the occasional inflationary spiral after World War I) and well before many countries had established domestic financial institutions (giving rise to the advent of banking crises), there were sovereign default crises. As has been documented elsewhere, these events usually entail significant and persistent economic dislocation.

Section I describes the data and empirical strategy used to date the capital flow cycle. Particular attention is devoted to measurement issues including a discussion on net versus gross capital flows. The following section studies the connection between capital flow cycles...
and the recurring waves of sovereign default documented in Reinhart and Rogoff (2009) since 1800. The last of these default waves came in the wake of rising international interest rates, collapsing commodity prices, and a sharp capital flow reversal, as inflows peaked in 1981 (commodity prices had peaked earlier). We conclude by recapping our main findings and their implications for the current cycle.

I. Data and Methodology

A. Capital Flow Accounting and Net versus Gross Flows

The simple rules of double-entry accounting ensure that, excluding statistical discrepancies, the capital account surplus, or net capital inflow (denoted by $KA$), is related to the current account surplus (denoted by $CA$) and to changes in the official reserves account (denoted by $RA$, where $\Delta RA < 0$ implies the accumulation of reserves by the monetary authority) through the identity:

$$CA + KA + \Delta RA \equiv 0.$$ 

A country that runs a current account deficit must finance this deficit either by a private capital inflow or by a reduction in its official reserves. In both cases, the country runs down its net foreign wealth. As data on capital/financial account balances is limited or nonexistent, we reconstruct the capital account ($KA$) by piecing together time series on the current account ($CA$) and official reserves. Prior to World War II, official reserves were dominated by gold.

This exercise approximates net capital flows. Such measures may be available from creditor countries (who record consistent net capital outflows), debtor countries importing capital, or (ideally) both. As in other studies of nineteenth century financial markets, much of the capital flow activity and data used in this study comes from the United Kingdom, which dominated finance until World War I. We also exploit that from the United Kingdom, which dominated flow activity and data used in this study comes

Figure 1 presents a panorama of the capital flow cycles of the nineteenth century. For 1815–1868, our data on bond issues covers 38 countries but is limited to sovereigns and sub-sovereigns. Private bond issuance played an increasingly prominent role in the latter part of the century. The figure overlays the bond issuance data and gross capital exports from the UK to the rest of the world with the UK current account (as a percent of GDP), which records net flows from the dominant financier. Three features stand out.

First, the different measures of international capital flows provide a fairly consistent narrative of the capital flow cycle. Second, the peaks and valleys are, for the most part, sharp and distinct. Third, the well-known ascent of global finance at the height of the Gold Standard Era is evident in the upward trend in these series. Global capital flows since World War I are aggregated from the constructed capital/financial account for individual countries, as described. The building blocks (i.e., current account balances, official gold, and foreign exchange reserves) are culled from a broad range of sources. The data availability and, thus, the country coverage vary by period, as noted in Figure 2. The interwar sample is comprised of 34 countries, while

3 The correlation between gross capital exports from the United Kingdom and the current account (which, abstracting from reserve changes and errors and omissions, should approximate net capital exports from the United Kingdom) is 0.77 over 1867–1914. The correlation between bond issuance and the current account is notably lower (0.40) but statistically significant at the 1 percent level. In part, this may reflect that not all funds were raised in London, as Paris, Amsterdam, and other centers were associated with some of the bonds issued during 1815–1868.
the post-World War II core group includes 68 countries. For many of these countries our time series extend back to the 1860s and earlier. Not included in Figure 2 is an even more inclusive...
sample of 132 capital importers for which we construct capital account data since 1980.4

B. Defining the Cycles and Episodes: 1815–2015

Harding and Pagan (2002) provide a persuasive case for a simple and mechanical scheme to date turning points in business cycles which we apply to the capital flow and commodity price data. These two authors also address the synchronization of two cycles, which is of interest to describe the interplay of the individual capital flow and commodity bonanza-bust cycles and helps to define the concept of a “Double Bonanza-Bust.”

This literature also counsels against overinterpreting specific dates. For instance, the dating of some bond issues is less than precise (some issues are listed as 1821–1822 and discrepancies across sources are not uncommon). Information on disbursements of funds (the actual capital flow) varies and is not uniformly reported. Balance of payments accounts (past and present) are subject to errors and omissions, which tend to worsen in times of turmoil when capital flight escalates. Valuation changes affect the gold stock and reserves data.

With these caveats in mind, Table 1 presents the dates, duration, and magnitudes of the global boom and bust cycles in capital flows since 1815. Online Appendix Table A1 and the longer working paper show a comparable exercise for real commodity prices. Most capital flow cycles lasted three to six years, abstracting from the 30-year stretch following World War II, during which restrictions on cross-border financial transactions kept the volume of international capital flows minimal. The capital flow bonanza that peaked in 2011 was exceptionally protracted (and came to an abrupt reversal after the taper tantrum of the spring of 2013 when the

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4The larger sample does not appreciably change the pattern shown in Figure 2.
Federal Reserve announced its intention to taper its extended post-crisis stimulus.

II. The End of Bonanzas

While the longer companion piece to this paper provides detailed analysis of the individual cycles and their connection (or not) to crises, Figure 3 provides a synthesis of the overlap between capital flow booms (pale shading) and the waves of (new) sovereign defaults. Darker shading in Figure 3 highlights double busts, meaning episodes where a decline in capital inflows overlaps with a contraction in real commodity prices (see Table 1).

The capital inflow-default link is clear and consistent over time. Out of a total of 14 capital boom episodes, 11 were followed by a sharp increase in sovereign defaults after the boom ended. All of the six major spikes in new defaults shown in Figure 3 occurred following the end of a global capital inflow bonanza. Moreover, four out of these six global default peaks can be associated with double busts in capital and commodity markets (dark shading). Not every default cycle is associated with collapsing commodity prices, as our sample includes countries that are not primary commodity producers and would not be adversely affected by falling commodity prices (see Reinhart, Reinhart, and Trebesch 2016).

Table 2 examines the connection between capital flow cycles and defaults more systematically. We use a dummy for the onset of sovereign defaults to external private creditors as dependent variable and apply logit and OLS panel fixed effects regressions for more than 100 countries (lines 1 and 2). In line 3, we regress the global share of countries entering default in each year between 1815 and 2015, using a fractional response logit model to account for the fact that this share is bound between zero and one. The end of global capital flow bonanzas is associated with a significant increase in sovereign default risk worldwide. The coefficients in line 2 suggest that the risk of entering default increases by a total of 12 percentage points in the five post-boom years (including the end year of booms as listed in the left panel of Table 1). This is very large given that the unconditional probability of defaulting is just 2 percent in the full sample.

III. Final Remarks

International capital flow cycles have displayed similar patterns over the past 200 years, both in duration and amplitude. While not all capital inflow cycles ended with a global wave of new debt crises, all the major spikes in sovereign defaults came on the heels of surges in capital inflows, especially those followed.
by “double busts” in capital and commodity markets.

As shown in Table 3, the global economy has been subject to a “double bust” since 2012, with a collapse in commodity prices and stark decline in capital inflows (and in some cases, outflows). Since then, the worldwide incidence of sovereign defaults has risen only modestly. Perhaps emerging market economies are more resilient this time around. But perhaps the protracted nature of the downturn in international conditions has yet to take its cumulative toll.

### Table 2—The End of Capital Flow Booms and Sovereign Default, 1815–2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>End year of capital flow boom</th>
<th>Lag 1</th>
<th>Lag 2</th>
<th>Lag 3</th>
<th>Lag 4</th>
<th>Lag 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Country FE logit (default onset)</td>
<td>1.014***</td>
<td>1.075***</td>
<td>1.385***</td>
<td>0.965***</td>
<td>0.959***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.213)</td>
<td>(0.208)</td>
<td>(0.187)</td>
<td>(0.216)</td>
<td>(0.216)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Country FE OLS (default onset)</td>
<td>0.022***</td>
<td>0.024***</td>
<td>0.037***</td>
<td>0.020***</td>
<td>0.020***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.006)</td>
<td>(0.006)</td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
<td>(0.006)</td>
<td>(0.006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Fractional logit (share of countries entering default)</td>
<td>1.070***</td>
<td>0.988***</td>
<td>1.448***</td>
<td>1.276***</td>
<td>1.309***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.280)</td>
<td>(0.304)</td>
<td>(0.304)</td>
<td>(0.442)</td>
<td>(0.469)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The dependent variable in lines 1 and 2 is a dummy for the start of default. In line 3 we use the global share of sovereigns entering a new default. Robust standard errors in parentheses (clustered on country in lines 1 and 2). Constant in lines 2 and 3 not reported.

***Significant at the 1 percent level.
**Significant at the 5 percent level.
*Significant at the 10 percent level.

### Table 3—The Latest Cycle in Historical Perspective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Global Boom (trough to peak)</th>
<th>Duration (years)</th>
<th>Change (in %)</th>
<th>Global Bust (peak to trough)</th>
<th>Duration (years)</th>
<th>Change (in %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Panel A. Global capital flows (change in percent of US GDP)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent cycle</td>
<td>1999–2011</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>2011–2015</td>
<td>4, ongoing</td>
<td>−15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average cycle</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>−12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel B. Global real commodity prices (change in percent)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent cycle</td>
<td>1999–2011</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>88.7</td>
<td>2011–2015</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>−25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average cycle</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>−25.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Capital inflows to 60 capital importers, excluding the United States. Since the end of the “double bonanza” in 2011, the global share of sovereigns in default has risen from 3 percent to 6 percent. Historically, the average increase after capital flow booms was 12 percentage points. For “double busts” it was 24 percentage points.

### REFERENCES


