

Quarterly Insights – July 2025

Markets Remain Resilient in the Second Quarter

Hello,

Market volatility spiked in the second quarter as the S&P 500 dropped sharply in early April following the announcement of sweeping reciprocal tariffs, although those initial losses were slowly and steadily recouped over the remainder of the quarter as initial tariff rates were reduced while economic growth proved resilient and inflation stayed low, allowing the S&P 500 to hit a new all-time high and finish the quarter with a strong gain.

The second quarter started with a proverbial thud as, on April 2nd, President Trump announced sweeping and substantial tariffs on virtually all U.S. trading partners. The tariff amounts were significantly larger than markets expected and their announcement sparked fears of a trade-war-driven economic slowdown, which hit stocks hard as the S&P 500 dropped more than 10% in the days following the tariff announcement. However, that low in the index on April 8th turned out to be the low for the quarter as the rest of April saw the administration take numerous steps to reduce the practical impact of those announced tariffs. A week after reciprocal tariffs were announced, the administration declared a 90-day delay where tariff rates on most trading partners would be just 10%, far below most reciprocal tariff rates. That delay was then followed by more steps to reduce the tariff burden, including important exemptions for key imports such as smartphones, semiconductors, pharmaceuticals and computers. The delay in reciprocal tariff rates and key category exemptions gave investors some confidence that the trade war would not automatically cause a recession, and that optimism combined with a solid first quarter earnings season to help the S&P 500 rally throughout the remainder of April and close with just a slight loss, down 0.68%.

The market rebound accelerated in May as Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent announced he would be meeting with Chinese trade officials in Geneva early in the month. That boosted investor expectations for more tariff relief and those hopes were fulfilled as the meeting resulted in a dramatic reduction in tariffs on Chinese imports from 145% to approximately 30%. That tariff reduction combined with still-solid economic growth further eroded investor concerns that tariffs would cause a recession and the S&P 500 extended its rebound. Finally, in late May, the Court of International Trade ruled the administration's tariffs were illegal under the law used to justify the duties. The case was appealed immediately and a decision should come in the third quarter, but the initial ruling raised the prospect that tariffs could be eliminated almost entirely by the courts in the coming months. That decision further strengthened the belief that tariffs would not derail the strong economy and the S&P 500 turned positive year to date and finished May with very strong gains, up 6.29%.

The rally continued in June although trade headlines, which had driven market moves for the first two months of the quarter, took a back seat to geopolitical concerns after Israel launched a massive attack on Iranian nuclear and military facilities. The hostilities between the two rivals caused oil prices to temporarily spike and that halted the rally in mid-to-late June, as investors again had to consider the prospect of rising oil prices hurting economic growth and boosting inflation. However, that volatility was limited, as following U.S. strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, a ceasefire was agreed to between Iran and Israel and oil prices dropped sharply, turning negative for the quarter. That decline, combined with rising expectations for rate cuts in the second half of the year, pushed the S&P 500 to new all-time highs in the final days of June.

In sum, the stock market completed an impressive rebound from the steep declines of early April, as steps by the administration to ease the tariff burden helped to boost investor confidence while corporate earnings remained strong and economic growth proved resilient, yet again, even in the face of geopolitical uncertainty and elevated policy volatility.

Second Quarter Performance Review

The gains in the S&P 500 in the second quarter were particularly impressive considering the intense selling witnessed in early April, as the market rebound was broad and the majority of indices, sectors and factors logged a positive return for the quarter.

By market capitalization, large caps outperformed small caps in Q2, as they did in the first quarter. A lack of Fed rate cuts, generally elevated bond yields and some soft economic data late in the second quarter weighed on small caps, although they still finished the quarter with a positive gain.

From an investment style standpoint, growth massively outperformed value in the second quarter, as tech-heavy growth funds attracted value-seeking investors following the April declines. Tariff reductions and exemptions also boosted the outlook for major tech firms. Value funds, meanwhile, were weighed down by weakness in energy shares but still managed a slightly positive return for the quarter.

On a sector level, seven of the 11 S&P 500 sectors finished the second quarter with positive returns. The best-performing sectors in the second quarter were the AI-linked technology and communications services sectors as well as the industrials sector. All three sectors benefited from tariff reductions and exemptions as many companies in these sectors have strong international businesses.

Turning to the sector laggards, energy and healthcare posted solidly negative returns for the quarter, as both were pressured by negative industry-specific news. For energy, volatility in oil prices (and a lack of a sustainable rally despite the Israel-Iran conflict) weighed on energy producers, as did general fears of an economic slowdown. For healthcare, uncertainty over

pharmaceutical tariffs as well as a legislative focus on reducing prescription drug costs weighed on healthcare stocks.

Switching to fixed income markets, the leading benchmark for bonds (Bloomberg U.S. Aggregate Bond Index) realized a modest positive return for the second quarter, as stable inflation readings and some cooling of U.S. economic growth late in the quarter boosted demand for bonds.

Looking deeper into the fixed income markets, longer-duration bonds outperformed shorter-duration bonds because of the aforementioned stable inflation data and slightly underwhelming economic readings. Shorter-term bonds lagged as the Fed remained in a “wait-and-see” approach to rate cuts given the central bank wants to wait to see the impacts from tariffs on both growth and inflation.

Turning to the corporate bond market, both investment grade and lower quality “high yield” bonds posted solidly positive quarterly returns. High-yield bonds outperformed investment grade debt, however, as generally resilient economic growth and the promise of looming tax cuts gave investors confidence to reach for higher yield and assume more credit risk.

Third Quarter Market Outlook

The markets begin the third quarter following an impressive first half performance, as the S&P 500 hit a new all-time high despite much-larger-than-expected tariffs on U.S. imports, a dramatic increase in policy volatility and more hostilities in the Middle East.

However, while the market was impressively resilient over the past three months, it would be a mistake for investors to become complacent in this environment, because there remain a lot of risks facing the economy and markets.

First, while the market has assumed that tariffs won’t rise substantially from current rates, there’s no guarantee of that. To that point, the deadline for the reciprocal tariff delay is July 9th and if that deadline is not extended, we could see tariff rates on major trading partners surge once again. Regardless, the reality is that global tariff rates are at multi-decade highs and it’s still uncertain how that will impact the economy in the months ahead (so risks of a tariff-induced slowdown or rise of stagflation can’t be dismissed).

Turning to geopolitics, while the various conflicts have not negatively impacted global markets, risks remain elevated. If Iran takes steps to disrupt global oil production or transit, that will boost oil prices and create a new headwind on markets. Similarly, if these isolated conflicts begin to spread into larger regional conflicts that will also lift oil prices and weigh on stocks and bonds.

Finally, investors still expect two interest rate cuts from the Federal Reserve between now and year-end; however, the unknown impact from tariffs on economic growth and inflation make rate cuts in 2025 far from certain. If the Federal Reserve does not cut rates in the coming months, that will increase concerns about an eventual economic slowdown and that could weigh on markets.

Bottom line, markets have been impressively resilient so far this year, but as we start the second half of 2025 there remain numerous, potentially significant risks to the markets and the economy and we will not let the market's resilience create a sense of complacency.

To that point, at Debczak Wealth Management, we are committed to helping you effectively navigate this investment environment. Successful investing is a marathon, not a sprint, and even intense volatility is unlikely to alter a diversified approach set up to meet your long-term investment goals.

Therefore, it's critical for you to stay invested, remain patient, and stick to the plan, as we've worked with you to establish a unique, personal allocation target based on your financial position, risk tolerance, and investment timeline.

We remain focused on both opportunities and risks in the markets, and we thank you for your ongoing confidence and trust. Please rest assured that our entire team will remain dedicated to helping you successfully navigate this market environment.

Index returns are not fund returns. An index is unmanaged and not available for direct investment. Past performance is no guarantee of future results.

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions, comments, or to schedule a portfolio review.

Sincerely,

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