Ariel investments

Quarterly Commentary

Ariel International Developed Markets / Emerging Markets

Quarter Ended December 31, 2024

Markets worldwide defied expectations in 2024 led by the dominating performance of U.S. mega-cap technology companies and investor enthusiasm for artificial intelligence (AI) themed stocks. However, persistent challenges in the Eurozone, including uncertainty around interest rates, concerns surrounding the new U.S. administration's policies as well as a strengthening U.S. dollar drove the MSCI ACWI, MSCI ACWI ex-U.S. and MSCI EAFE Indices into the red. China's economy also ended the year sluggishly, with September's stimulus efforts losing steam and the recovery in consumer spending turning elusive. Although uncertainty and volatility are likely to remain elevated, the patient investor knows "stock prices trade on fundamentals. And when those solid fundamentals shine through, share prices rise.[1]" Against this backdrop, the Ariel International (DM/EM) Composite decreased -4.94% gross of fees (-5.07% net of fees) in the period, outpacing both its primary and secondary benchmark, the MSCI ACWI ex-US and MSCI ACWI ex-US Value Indices, which returned -7.60% and -7.31%, respectively. Over the trailing one-year period, the Ariel International (DM/EM) Composite increased +5.98% gross of fees (+5.43% net of fees), relatively in-line with both the MSCI ACWI ex-US Index and the MSCI ACWI ex-US Value Index, which gained +5.53% and +6.04%, respectively.

Ariel's non-consensus approach seeks to identify undervalued, out-of-favor, franchises that are misunderstood and therefore mispriced. The Ariel International (DM/EM) bottom-up strategy is overweight Consumer Discretionary, Utilities, Financials, Health Care and Information Technology. The portfolio is meaningfully underweight Industrials, Energy, Consumer Staples and lacks exposure to Materials. At the sector level, our Real Estate holdings, avoidance of Materials as well as stock selection within Health Care and Consumer Staples were the largest sources of positive attribution. By comparison, our investment choices within Communication Services and Information Technology, as well as our positioning within Consumer Discretionary were the greatest performance detractors during in the quarter.

Emaar Properties PJSC, a property investment and development company in the MENA region, traded higher over the period on strong earnings results, highlighted by record quarterly residential sales, healthy margins and robust free cash flow. Additionally, the company announced an attractive long-term dividend policy to return capital to shareholders. Looking ahead, we believe Emaar Properties will continue to benefit from the post COVID recovery in Dubai's real estate market, which has been amplified by a large number of expatriates entering the country.

Germany-based kidney dialysis services and products provider, **Fresenius Medical Care AG** also advanced in the period following solid quarterly earnings results driven by an inflection in the U.S. market as treatment volumes returned to positive growth. Subsequently, management upgraded its 2024 outlook and reaffirmed guidance for 2025. Meanwhile, the company continues to successfully execute on its goal to exit non-core assets in Latin America and invest in Europe and Asia. Additionally, a new ruling from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) for 2025 that increases payments to end-stage renal disease facilities further aided shares. At current valuation levels, we believe the Fresenius remains well-positioned from a risk/reward standpoint.

New holding, Italian bank, **Banca Monte dei Paschi** also increased following a quarterly earnings beat and subsequent raise in full year guidance. The Italian government also sold a portion of its stake in the firm further aiding share price appreciation. We believe the bank can provide long-term earnings stability through its recent actions to reduce interest rate sensitivity and improve asset quality, thereby enhancing profitability and the balance sheet. Additionally, the bank's increased payout ratio to 75% and attractive cash yield—the highest among European Union banks—bolsters our positive outlook. Furthermore, we think a favorable interest rate outlook alongside the company's solid capital profile and robust trading book as well as the potential for consolidation in the Italian banking sector presents additional upside potential.

Alternatively, French multinational tire manufacturer, **Michelin (CDGE)** was a notable underperformer in the period due to a challenging macro environment. Weaker-than-expected consumer demand caused a sharp decline in volumes resulting in to a top- and bottom-line earnings miss.

[1] Hobson, Mellody and John W. Rogers Jr. "What the Stock market Taught Us This Year: Don't Fall for These Investing Traps." *Wall Street Journal*, 5 December 2023.

Subsequently, management cut 2024 guidance and announced plans to close two of its factories by 2026 to reduce costs. Nonetheless, we remain enthusiastic about Michelin's strong global competitive position and pricing strategy. In our view, shares are trading at a large discount to historical multiples despite a stronger balance sheet, higher free cash flow generation and attractive returns of capital to shareholders.

China-based E-commerce company, **JD.com, Inc.** also detracted from performance in the period. The stock came under pressure as some investors took profits on solid earnings performance, while others became concerned with the implications tariffs could have on the Chinese economy. In our view, this share price action runs counter to the company's solid business fundamentals. The home appliance trade-in program and popular shopping event, Singles' Day, generated significant consumer spending across various product categories. Additionally, the company's strategic decision to diversify general merchandise product offerings, expand its third-party marketplace business and monetize advertising streams continues to aid the top- and bottom-lines. Despite the near-term noise, we continue to view the company's strategic positioning favorably and like JD.com's long-term growth prospects.

Lastly, French pharmaceutical company, **Sanofi** underperformed. The new administration's decision to appoint a well-known vaccine critic as the future Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) weighed on pharmaceutical shares industrywide. In our view, the sell-off is an overreaction, as the vaccine business is a small part of Sanofi's total revenue. Moreover, vaccine effectiveness is supported by strong scientific evidence and real-world data, particularly for young, elderly and at-risk patients. At current valuation levels, we view Sanofi's vaccine business and its Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) Antibody as underappreciated and believe the immunology pipeline continues to be overlooked. Also, we remain optimistic Dupixent will be a key long-term growth driver.

In addition to purchasing Italian bank, **Banca Monte dei Paschi**, we initiated six new positions in the quarter.

We added global bank and financial services provider, **Barclays PLC**. We expect shares to benefit from a recovery in global capital markets and net interest income (NII) growth driven by macroeconomic hedging and asset flows. The bank is also planning to expand its investment banking advisory business. Moreover, its U.S. credit card business presents opportunities for either a potential sale or a quicker earnings recovery. Taken together, we see a reasonable path for Barclays to pursue its return targets, which include the distribution of £3 billion and £10 billion to shareholders through dividends and share repurchases between 2024 and 2026 and achieving a return on tangible common equity of about 12%.

We initiated a position in specialty insurance company, **Beazley plc**. The firm's diversified portfolio offerings include commercial property, specialty risk and cyber insurance. We find the growth and profitability profile of its property segment to be attractive as 100% of its business in North America is being generated by the booming Excess and Surplus (E&S) market—an area that caters to non-traditional, high-risk insurance needs. Cyber also presents an exciting structural growth opportunity for the company, particularly since insurance penetration of information assets is low. Looking ahead, we find Beazley's earnings outlook to be attractive, supported by its robust business mix, solid margins and improving capital profile.

We also bought leading European telecommunications services operator, **Orange SA**. The company offers mobile, fixed-line and broadband services to roughly 300 million customers across 26 countries. Orange SA has a strong market presence in France and Spain and is expanding operations across the Middle East and Africa (MEA). We believe positive subscriber trends and rational price increases across these markets will support long term revenue growth. For instance, Orange is gaining market share on its network and service quality in France; benefitting from merger synergies and monetizing the fiber business in Spain; and offering mobile data services to significantly under-penetrated regions in MEA. Meanwhile, as the company completes its fiber-roll-out in France, we expect higher profitability, free cash flow generation and increasing shareholder returns.

We purchased **Redeia Corp SA**, a Spain-based electricity provider. We believe Redeia's ability to generate robust earnings growth with further upside from additional regulatory drivers is currently being underappreciated by the market.

We added shares of leading pure-play producer of memory semiconductor products, **SK Hynix Inc**. In our view, SK Hynix is well positioned to benefit from increased deployment of its leading-edge High Bandwidth Memory (HBM) products, which are experiencing rapid demand growth to power Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Finally, we initiated a position in **Sega Sammy Holdings Inc.**, a Japanese holding company specializing in the development of video games and the production of pachinko and pachislot machines. We believe the company is poised to deliver higher earnings, driven by robust growth within its video game segment. This is largely due to the company's new multiplatform storytelling strategy centered around the firm's core intellectual property: *Sonic*, *Atlus*, and *Like a Dragon*. We believe it will help drive sales of both old and new titles, thereby boosting margins. Meanwhile, the pachinko and pachislot segment remains a profitable and stable cash flow generator for the company.

By comparison, we successfully sold Brazilian insurance company, **BB Seguridade Participacoes SA** and high-tech

solutions and services provider in the defense and satellite space, **Thales SA** on valuation. We also exited Brazil-based brewing company, **Ambev SA**, British home and auto insurer, **Direct Line Insurance Group Plc**, Finnish telecommunications and consumer electronics company, **Nokia Oyj**, and multinational telecom company, **Vodafone Group PLC** to pursue more compelling opportunities.

The stock market dynamics of 2024 highlight a transformative shift in the global economy, fueled by advancements in artificial intelligence and geopolitical fragmentation. While the narrow ascent of AI themed stocks have driven market returns in recent years, opportunities should broaden to companies utilizing AI to create real-world efficiencies. As we head into 2025, there may be an over-reliance on the U.S. stock market to drive returns. With uncertainty surrounding rate cuts as well as the policy agenda for the new US administration, we expect heightened market volatility. We see this environment as conducive for active managers, whose knowledge, expertise and forward thinking enables them to look beyond the short-term noise and identify opportunities. Accordingly, we are finding many mispriced global and international stocks trading at a discount to their U.S. counterparts. Their valuation is attractive, profitability less vulnerable and balance sheets remain strong. Against this backdrop, our international and global portfolios are well-positioned to deliver stronger returns over the long run.

Investments in non-U.S. securities may underperform and may be more volatile than comparable U.S. stocks because of the risks involving non-U.S. economies, markets, political systems, regulatory standards, currencies and taxes. The use of currency derivatives and ETFs may increase investment losses and expenses and create more volatility. Investments in emerging markets present additional risks, such as difficulties in selling on a timely basis and at an acceptable price. The intrinsic value of the stocks within the strategy may never be recognized by the broader market. The strategy is often concentrated in fewer sectors than its benchmarks, and its performance may suffer if these sectors underperform the overall stock market.

Past performance does not guarantee future results. For the period ended 12/31/2024, the performance (net of fees) of the Ariel International (DM/EM) Composite for the 1-, 5-, and 10-year periods were +5.43%, +4.11%, and +4.51%, respectively. For the period ended 12/31/2024, the performance for the MSCI ACWI ex US Index and the MSCI ACWI ex US Value Index for the 1-, 5-, and 10-year periods were +5.53%, +4.10%, +4.80% and +6.04%, +4.50%, and +4.07%, respectively. Ariel Composite Net of Fees returns are calculated by deducting: (1) for the period from inception to December 31, 2013, the maximum advisory fee in effect for the respective period, applied on a monthly basis; and (2) for the period from January 1, 2014 onwards, the actual monthly advisory fee (on an asset-weighted basis) accrued for the accounts in the composite, using the fee rates in place as of the most recent calendar quarter-end. Gross returns do not reflect the deduction of advisory fees. Client returns will be reduced by advisory fees and such other expenses as may be incurred in the management of the account. Advisory fees are described in Part 2 of Ariel's Form ADV. Returns assume the reinvestment of dividends and other earnings. Returns are expressed in U.S. dollars. Current performance may be lower or higher than the performance data quoted. The Ariel International (DM/EM) Composite differs from its benchmark, the MSCI ACWI (All Country World Index) ex US, because: (i) the Composite has fewer holdings than the benchmark and (ii) the Composite will at times invest a portion of its assets in the U.S.

The opinions expressed are current as of the date of this commentary but are subject to change. The information provided in this commentary does not provide information reasonably sufficient upon which to base an investment decision and should not be considered a recommendation to purchase or sell any particular security. There is no guarantee that any of the views expressed will come to fruition or any investment will perform as described.

A glossary of financial terms provided herein may be found on our website at www.arielinvestments.com.

As of 12/31/2024, Emaar Properties (P.J.S.C) constituted 2.8% of the Ariel International (DM/EM) Composite (representative portfolio); Fresenius Medical Care AG 3.9%; Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena SpA 2.2%; Michelin 4.2%; JD.com, Inc. 3.4%; Sanofi 4.2%; Barclays PLC 2.1%; Beazley PLC 1.6%; Orange SA 1.5%; Redeia Corp SA 2.6%; SK Hynix Inc. 1.0%; Sega Sammy Holdings Inc. 1.8%; Ambev SA 0.0%; BB Seguridade Participacoes SA 0.0%; Direct Line Insurance Group PLC 0.0%; Nokia Oyj 0.0%; Thales SA 0.0%; Vodafone Group PLC 0.0%. Portfolio holdings are subject to change. The performance of any single portfolio holding is no indication of the performance of other portfolio holdings of the Ariel International (DM/EM) Composite.

Indexes are unmanaged. An investor cannot invest directly in an index. The MSCI ACWI (All Country World Index) ex-US Index is an index of large and mid-cap representation across 22 Developed Markets (DM) and 24 Emerging Markets (EM) countries. Its inception date is January 1, 2001. The MSCI ACWI ex-US Value Index captures large and mid-cap securities exhibiting overall value style characteristics across 22 Developed and 24 Emerging Markets countries. Its inception date is December 8, 1997. All MSCI Index net returns reflect the reinvestment of income and other earnings, including the dividends net of the maximum withholding tax applicable to non-resident institutional investors that do not benefit from double taxation treaties. MSCI uses the

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