

CIO Brief

FX Certainty in Cross-Border M&A

Managing Commitment Without Break Risk

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1. The Decision Problem CIOs Actually Face

Cross-border M&A rarely fails because FX markets behave unexpectedly. It fails because investment committees are asked to approve FX commitment **before deal certainty exists**.

In competitive auctions, acquirers are required to submit bids with fixed or near-fixed economics weeks or months before it is clear whether the transaction will complete. FX exposure is economically real from the moment a bid is formulated, but the obligation to transact is not.

This creates a persistent governance problem. FX decisions are taken under uncertainty that cannot be diversified away, deferred, or neutralised with standard tools. When transactions fail, FX outcomes are scrutinised not as market results, but as judgement failures – often regardless of whether the hedge behaved as designed.

The result is a familiar pattern: institutions oscillate between hedging too early and hedging too late, rarely because of market views, but because governance frameworks force binary choices where none should exist.

2. Why This Problem Persists Despite Experience

This problem does not disappear with experience, stronger treasury teams, or better market access.

The reason is structural.

Deal probability does not evolve smoothly over time. It moves in steps – exclusivity, regulatory clearance, executed documentation. Each milestone represents a discrete jump in certainty. FX markets, by contrast, move continuously.

Standard hedging frameworks ignore this mismatch. They implicitly assume that exposure and commitment should occur on the same timeline. In cross-border M&A, that assumption is wrong.

Most IC frameworks are designed for capital deployment decisions, not conditional commitments.

As a result, many institutions find themselves making FX decisions that are defensible in isolation but misaligned with how deals actually progress. This is why FX outcomes on failed deals attract disproportionate attention: they expose a timing mismatch that governance processes are not designed to handle.

3. The Trade-Off Most Institutions Avoid Naming

Most FX hedging debates in M&A are framed as technical questions – forwards versus options, cost versus protection, hedge ratios and tenors.

In reality, they are debates about **discretion**.

Optionality has value because it preserves the ability to decide later. That value is expensive, and in many transactions, it is purchased reflexively rather than deliberately. Conversely, certainty requires giving up discretion – something many institutions are uncomfortable doing explicitly.

As a result, many frameworks implicitly try to achieve both: FX certainty without commitment, or optionality without cost.

This is not a market failure. It is a decision failure.

Until the trade-off between certainty and discretion is made explicit, institutions will continue to oscillate between structures that solve one problem by creating another.

4. Conditional Commitment as a Structural Solution

There is a class of FX hedging instruments designed specifically to address this timing mismatch: **Contingent FX forwards**.

These instruments are often misunderstood as a form of option. They are not.

A contingent FX forward is a forward contract with a conditional activation mechanism. An FX rate is agreed in advance, but the obligation to transact arises only if a defined deal milestone occurs. If the transaction proceeds, the hedge activates automatically and behaves like a standard forward. If the transaction does not proceed, the hedge never activates and break risk is avoided.

The critical feature is the absence of discretion. Once the trigger is met, the obligation is binding. There is no exercise decision and no economic choice.

This is precisely why the structure is cheaper than an option. The bank is not selling optionality. It is underwriting conditional commitment.

For CIOs and ICs, the relevance is not product mechanics. It is governance alignment. Contingent forwards allow FX commitment to occur **when deal certainty justifies it**, rather than when bids are submitted or approvals are sought.

5. What This Structure Enables – and What It Forbids

Used correctly, contingent FX forwards enable institutions to submit credible bids without embedding unacceptable break risk. They allow investment committees to approve FX frameworks that are explicitly conditional, rather than pretending that early commitment is risk-free.

They also impose discipline.

Once triggered, the hedge must be honoured regardless of subsequent FX movements. There is no upside participation and no post-trigger re-optimisation. This is not a flaw. It is the cost of certainty.

As a result, these structures are inappropriate where discretion after the trigger is required, or where governance frameworks cannot tolerate automatic execution. In such cases, options – despite their cost – are the correct tool.

The key point is that contingent forwards are not a compromise between forwards and options. They are a different category entirely, designed for a specific failure mode that standard hedging tools do not address.

6. Where Contingent FX Forwards Work – and Where They Do Not

Contingent FX forwards are most effective when:

- Deal milestones are binary and externally verifiable
- Deal probability jumps materially at defined points
- Governance allows automatic execution once conditions are met
- FX certainty is prioritised over upside participation

They are inappropriate when:

- Outcomes are subjective or discretionary
- Internal approvals are required post-trigger
- Volatility or liquidity risk dominates pricing
- Optionality is an explicit objective of the investment thesis

These boundaries are not theoretical. Most failed implementations can be traced to violations of them.

7. What This Changes for an Investment Committee

For investment committees, the relevance of contingent FX forwards is not technical sophistication. It is decision clarity.

They allow ICs to:

- Approve FX frameworks aligned with deal probability rather than bid timing
- Avoid post-mortems driven by break-risk losses
- Distinguish clearly between certainty and optionality

They also remove ambiguity. Once a trigger is approved, execution follows automatically. That discipline is uncomfortable for some organisations – but it is precisely what prevents FX hedges from becoming second-guessed decisions under stress.

8. Closing Thought

Contingent FX forwards do not eliminate FX risk. They eliminate a specific failure mode: being forced to choose between execution credibility and unacceptable break risk.

That is not financial engineering. It is structural discipline.

9. Further Reading and Practitioner Resources

Para Bellum Advisors publishes practitioner papers and CIO Briefs:
www.parabellumadvisors.com/insights.

10. About Para Bellum Advisors

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The firm works with lean investment teams managing complex, long-dated portfolios across FX, rates, credit, equity, and volatility risk. Its focus is not on product distribution, but on structure: how hedges are designed, how capital is consumed, and how portfolios behave under stress.

Para Bellum Advisors is practitioner-led. Its work draws on decades of experience across trading, structuring, and portfolio management in banks, asset managers, and insurance balance sheets. The objective is not theoretical optimisation, but durable improvement in capital efficiency, liquidity resilience, and realised outcomes.

For more information, visit www.offers.parabellumadvisors.com

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