The Hamada Beta Adjustment and the Cost of Capital for the Regulated Utilities

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I. Introduction

Despite many issues with the Capital Asset Pricing Model (CAPM), it is still one of main methods that is used to estimate the expected rate of return on equity for regulated utilities in rate proceedings in the United States. A primary underpinning of the model is that investors require compensation for bearing undiversifiable systematic risk. A product of the theory is that the degree of systematic risk (beta risk) an investor bears for investing in any equity security is measured by how closely the stock's price changes (returns) covary with the overall market, proxied by the returns on a market index. The expected cost of equity is the sum of two parts: a risk-free rate and a risk premium which is the product of the beta of the company's stock and a market risk premium. A key ingredient of course is the stock's beta, which depends upon the nature of the business as well as how the business is financed. Our focus in this note is on the latter relation between beta and how a company is financed (specifically the debt/equity ratio), and how this relation if not considered correctly can lead to incorrect estimates of a company's required return on equity, and consequently to incorrect rate adjustments.

Technical Box A: CAPM

$$R = R_f + \beta (R_m - R_f),$$

Where R is the required or expected return on equity for the utility, R_f is the risk-free rate, β is the company beta, and R_m is the market return. $(R_m - R_f)$ is the market risk premium.

In the practice of a rate proceeding, various methods have been utilized to model each of the three components of the CAPM: the risk-free return, the market risk premium, and the beta. Some rate-setting commissions have specific requirements regarding how to model each component. For example, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) requires the risk-free interest rate to be a long-term Treasury Bond yield, the company stock beta is the beta value provided by Value Line, and the market risk premium is measured by the difference between the market return based on a one-step DCF model applied to the dividend paying S&P 500 companies and the risk-free rate. The rules however are not uniform across state commissions, so that an estimate in one jurisdiction could potentially deviate from an estimate in another for the same company. At the same time there has been increasing advocacy for methods designed to adjust beta. The point of this note is to consider one such adjustment and to highlight how that adjustment can lead to a biased estimate of a company's beta and hence the required return on equity.

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Theory tells us that beta as generally measured, is under certain conditions, positively related to the company's debt to equity ratio, where the ratio is measured using the total market values of a company's debt and equity. It is important to recognize that the beta computed by most popular commercial services, such as Value Line and Bloomberg, is based upon market returns. What does this mean? Specifically, the returns on a stock are based upon the assessment by capital market participants of changes in the stock's value which are then reflected in changes in its market price. Changes in valued reflect market participants' interpretation of fundamental information about the company, including how it is financed. The market value debt to equity ratio reflects the extent to which the shareholders share the total value of the company with the debtholders, and hence the shareholders' exposure to debt financing. Recognize that the total value of a company equals, in usual parlance, the total market value of the debt and equity, which would only by accident equal the book value of debt plus the book value of equity. In other words, market participants know this information and condition changes in prices on knowledge of a company's market value debt to equity ratio.

Hence, the implied cost of capital, whether the equity required return or the weighted average cost of capital, is a number based upon the market values of debt and equity not book values.[1] This leads us to an important issue confronting rate setting commissions. One common practice on the side of the ROE requesting utilities is to use what is commonly referred to as the Hamada equation to make an adjustment to the beta value obtained from an investment service. The argument for this so-called leverage adjustment is that the capital structure use in calculating the weighted average cost of capital is based on book value but the return on equity is based on the market value, and in addition, the rate base is based on book value.

Setting aside how the weighted average cost of capital is computed, whether using book value or market value weights, we explore the implications of adjusting beta using the book value versus market value debt to equity ratio. As the market value of most utility's equity nowadays is typically higher than the book value of the equity, the book value debt ratio will typically be larger than if the market value debt/equity ratio is employed. As the beta computed using market returns reflects the market debt/equity ratio, if instead it is

adjusted to conform to a book value debt/equity ratio, the resulting beta will be larger than the observed beta provided by say Value Line. Such an adjustment would lead to higher beta values and thus a higher calculated expected rate of return on equity given the estimate of the risk-free rate and the market risk premium.

II. What is the Hamada equation?

Professor Hamada, once the dean of the famed Booth College of Business at the University of Chicago, was the first to derive the relation between a company's stock's beta and the company's market value debt/equity ratio. Specifically he shows that beta increases as the market debt/equity ratio increases. Hamada defines two different betas for a company's stock. One beta is what we usually obtain from the investment services such as Value Line, and this beta is called the levered beta as it is derived from the market data reflecting the company's existing capital structure, that is, its market value debt/equity ratio. In contrast, suppose the same company used no debt financing, then the corresponding beta would be what we would observe for an unlevered (no debt financing) company, and is typically referred to as the unlevered beta. The levered beta exceeds the unlevered beta which the company uses debt financing. Note that all terms are measured in market values.

The equation shown nearby shows how a company's beta changes as the company's market value debt/equity ratio changes. The higher the market value debt/equity ratio (leverage), the higher the financial risk and thus the higher is beta. For example, if a company's unlevered beta is 1.0, the market value debt/equity ratio is 0.5, and the marginal tax rate is 21%, then the levered beta would be 1.395, an increase of 39.5%.

Technical Box B – The Hamada Equation:

$$\beta_L = \beta_U * [1 + (1-t)\, D/E],$$

where β_L is the levered beta, which measures the firm's systematic risk with the impact of debt and β_U is the unlevered beta, which measures the firm's systematic risk without the impact of debt, t is the marginal tax rate, D/E is the company's debt-to-equity ratio which measures the company's financial leverage.

The beauty of the Hamada Equation is that it can be used to infer what a company's beta would equal for any assumed debt/equity ratio, including what an analyst might argue is the debt/equity ratio that goes with an 'optimal' capital structure for the company.[2] The process of finding a new levered beta involves what is often referred to as first unlevering and then relevering. The starting levered beta is observed by consulting an investment service such as Value Line. The unlevered beta is not directly observable but can be backed out of the Hamada formula if other information such as the tax rate and an estimate of the market value debt ratio are available. This process is called unlevering. The unlevered beta can then be relevered to obtain the new levered beta estimate that is conditional on an assumed debt/equity ratio which could be the one that goes with the optimal capital structure. This process of course makes the explicit assumption that the current debt/equity ratio is not what is desired and that shortly in the future the company will rearrange its financing to reflect a better mix and a new debt/equity ratio.

Take the example of finding the beta for a company's stock assuming the current debt/equity ratio is not the best but the analyst believes she knows what the best debt/equity ratio equals. Suppose the current observable beta or levered beta is 0.8 for a utility that has a debt ratio of 1.25. With a tax rate of 0.21, the unlevering process would generate an unlevered beta of 0.40. Conceptually, if the company used no debt financing the beta would be 0.40.

Suppose the optimal capital structure is 50% debt and 50% equity, so the debt-to-equity ratio would equal 1.0, then the relevered beta would equal 0.716. Specifically with the optimal capital structure, the company's beta would equal 0.716, a value less than the current levered beta value of 0.8.

Two important assumptions underlying the Hamada equation are first that the beta of the company's debt is zero, and second that the CAPM model is valid.

III. How is the Hamada equation used to adjust the beta in rate proceedings?

Sometimes, the Hamada equation is used in rate proceedings to adjust the unlevered beta using the book value debt/equity ratio. If the book value of equity is less than the total market value of equity, which is typical nowadays, this will lead to a beta that is inflated more than it should be, and consequently a required return on equity computed using the CAPM that is larger than it should be. The argument goes that such a "book value leverage adjustment" is necessary because the required rate of return on equity will be used to compute a weighted average cost of capital using weights based upon the book values of debt and equity. According to advocates of this suggested adjustment, beta based on a market value capital structure mis-represents the financial risk of the company, and therefore, the conventionally available betas cannot be used directly in the CAPM, unless the cost of equity developed using these betas is applied to the computation of a weighted average cost of capital in which the weights are based upon market values. The market value capital structure of a utility and the company's book value capital structure typically are not the same. The argument that , there is a need to make the so-called leverage adjustment to adjust the beta to reflect the utility's risk based on book value capital structure, is simply incorrect as true risk is not based upon historic book values. The reason is that the book value of the assets of the company is not a true reflection of the assets' market value and it is the market value of the assets which indicates the true support for the company's debt.

The following example illustrates how the Hamada equation used incorrectly leads to a cost of capital that is too large.

Assume a utility with a market value debt/equity ratio[3] of 0.8 has a Value Line reported beta of 0.75. Suppose the company's marginal tax rate equals 21% , then the company's unlevered beta can be computed as shown earlier, and will equal 0.46.

Utility total equity market values are usually significantly higher than the book values, leading to a significantly higher book value debt/equity ratio than would be the case for the market value debt/equity ratio. This comparison is typically the reason why some analysts claim that the financial risk represented by the book value is higher than the financial risk represented by the market value.[4] But this is inherently a flawed argument as we have just commented.

Assume for our example company that the book value debt/equity ratio is 1.0. The unlevered beta value of 0.46 is then relevered by the book value capital structure to arrive at an adjusted estimate of beta that would for our illustration, equal 0.82, a 9% increase in the beta to be used in the cost of capital calculation

The book value relevered beta value when used in the CAPM model will therefore lead to a required return on equity that is larger than it should be.

IV. Is the Hamada adjustment reasonable?

In summary we repeat the limitations of the book value debt/equity adjustment process as well as a more general limitation of the Hamada model.

First, unlike the process of unlevering and relevering the market value beta to obtain a levered market value beta that reflects the optimal market value capital structure, relevering the market value unlevered beta using the book value debt/equity ratio, yields a beta estimate that cannot be interpreted, and therefore cannot legitimately be used in the estimation of the cost of capital in the CAPM model.

Second, the Hamada adjustment process assumes, even if we are using the correct market value deb/equity ratio, that the beta of the company's debt is zero. This assumption is simply not strictly met, although academic studies that present estimates of bond betas generally find that they are small but nevertheless positive.[5] Thus the formula is invalid for any levering or unlevering operations in general if the company's debt beta is not zero or the risk is systematic[6].

V. Conclusions

We have demonstrated in this short note what the Hamada leverage adjustment is and how it should be applied. We also pointed out that one of the applications of this formula is in the context of capital cost estimation in the rate case proceedings for public utilities. That application involves an adjustment based upon the book values of debt and equity of the utility. We illustrate how such an adjustment leads to an incorrect estimate of the beta used in the Capital Asset Pricing Model formula, which in turns leads to an estimated required return on equity that is too large. While this adjustment is used to justify the higher requested return on equity by utilities, this is an incorrect use of the Hamada equation adjustment. We have pointed out the invalidity of the adjustment process using book values for debt and equity as the theory underlying the Hamada equation requires a debt/equity ratio based upon market values. In other words, if the adjustment is to be correct there is no room for the use of book values.

Many analysts in the past rate proceedings have pointed out various issues with the application of the Hamada leverage adjustment; however, to our knowledge, there is no clear demonstration of how this Hamada leverage adjustment application is invalid in its process. It is our hope that practitioners engaged in the estimation of utility cost of capital recognize the issues we raise and the biases that can arise from the incorrect application of the Hamada adjustment. Our second objective with this note is to inform the many jurisdictional authorities faced with the task of deciding on rate adjustments of the potential biases we have highlighted. Perhaps, these decision makers have recognized the potential problems we outline as no such Hamada adjustment has yet been allowed in any utility rate proceedings to our knowledge. However, this is not to say that cost of capital witnesses have not been advocating the type of book value debt/equity adjustment we have illustrated which makes the information we provide both timely and of potentially important. In our opinion, due to its lack of theoretical support and the upward bias it introduces, the idea of making the so-call book value leverage adjustment to beta should be put to rest.

Footnotes

[1] The general practice in the rate making process, however, is to use book value capital structure in weighting the cost of capital, for some reasons, see, for example, Roger A. Morin, New Regulatory Finance, Public Utilities Reports, Inc., 2006, page 452. This has been another important and interesting issue in the practice. However, it goes beyond the scope of this note.

[2] We do not take up the issue of what an 'optimal' capital structure might be for any particular utility. Some argue this can be inferred by looking at industry averages, but that presumes the industry participants are themselves choosing optimally. Needless to say, the concept of what is an optimal capital structure is by no means a resolved issue.

[3] The market value of equity can be based on the market capitalization. Utility debt instruments are frequently not traded and so do not have observable market prices. However, under current reporting requirements, fair value estimates of a utility's debt can be obtained from the utility's 10K report.

[4] Again, the notion of two different financial risks is dubious as a company cannot have two different measures of financial risks that are not the same.

[5] See a study of bond returns by Backaert and De Santis, "Risk and return in international corporate bond markets", Journal of International Financial Markets, Institutions & Money, Vol. 72, 2021.

[6] By systematic we mean that the returns on the bond vary with the returns on a market index the way the returns on a stock vary with an index. Conine demonstrated that the Hamada formula is not compatible with the assumption of issuing risky debt. See Conine, T. (1980) Corporate Debt and Corporate Taxes: An Extension. The journal of Finance, 35(4), 1033-1037.