

Walking a High Wire



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Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24th — when the S&P 500 Index reached its lowest intraday level of 2022 — the equity market has recovered 8.5%. Year-to-date, US equities are now down 6.1%.

In Europe — which bears a bigger brunt of the Ukraine-Russia war — the Euro Stoxx 50 troughed on March 7th and has recovered 15.2% from its intraday lows and is now down 8.9% year-to-date.

VIX, among the best measures of market fear, has declined from its peak level of 37.8 reached on February 24th to 23.9 now.

The inevitable questions on our clients' minds are whether the worst of the equity market decline is behind us and whether our investment recommendation to stay invested is still valid.

On our last client call on the Ukraine-Russia crisis on February 25 — which featured Jose Manuel Barroso, former President of the European Commission who dealt with President Putin during the Crimea War, Ash Carter, former Secretary of Defense, and Sir Alex Younger, former Chief of British Secret Intelligence (commonly known as MI6), all three of whom have Goldman Sachs affiliations — we shared an exhibit (abbreviated below, see Exhibit 1) on the downdrafts from past geopolitical shocks. The average excluding WWII has been 8.5%, and the largest decline occurred in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion of Kuwait at 16.9%. The intraday high-to-low decline of the S&P 500 during this shock has been 14.6% or 12.9% based on closing prices. If history is a useful guide — as we believe it to be — then the equity market decline may well be behind us.

1. Historical Equity Market Returns Around Geopolitical Shocks

Reaction to Select Geopolitical Events				
Event	Fed Policy Stance	S&P 500		
		Next Day	30-Day	To Worst
Downing of MH17 (Jul-2014)	Steady	-0.2	-1.3	-3.6
Crimea Conflict (Feb-2014)	Steady	0.8	0.7	N/A
US Invasion of Iraq (Mar-2003)	Easing	2.5	2.2	-3.0
September 11 Attacks (Sep-2001)	Easing	N/A	0.4	-11.6
Iraq Invasion of Kuwait (Aug-1990)	Easing	-3.0	-9.3	-16.9
Iran-Iraq War (Sep-1980)	Tightening	0.1	2.1	-4.4 (-27%) ¹
Arab Oil Embargo (Oct-1973)	Tightening	-0.2	-5.7	-16.4
Gulf of Tonkin Incident (Aug-1964)	Steady	-0.2	-1.2	-2.2
Cuban Missile Crisis (Oct-1962)	Tightening	-3.8	9.4	-3.8
Invasion of South Korea (Jun-1950)	N/A	-5.4	-10.0	-12.9
Pearl Harbor Attack (Dec-1941)	N/A	-3.8	-2.9	-10.2
World War II (Sep-1939–Sep-45)	N/A	1.1	14.4	-33.2 (-44%) ²

Source: Investment Strategy Group, Council on Foreign Relations, Bloomberg, Datastream, Global Financial Data.

(1) Peak-to-trough maximum drawdown experienced by the S&P 500 during the subsequent recession and bear market (Nov-1980 through Aug-1982)

(2) Peak-to-trough maximum drawdown experienced by the S&P 500 during WWII (Oct-1939 through Apr-1942).

However, clients and colleagues are rightfully pushing back and pointing out the reasons why this time is different from past geopolitical crises. The geopolitical and economic risks are far greater and everyone is walking dangerous high wires.

Ukraine-Russia War: Based on geopolitical experts' insights into the possible scenarios, it is unlikely that this war will end soon. As explained by Dr. Carter on our client call, this will be a "big fight [...] with the Ukrainian military [...] and with the Ukrainian population." He also said that "this is not going to be something that settles down and stabilizes quickly."

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has turned everyone into a funambulist. President Putin is walking a high wire: there is a non-zero probability of escalation to the point where he may resort to cyber, biological, chemical, or even tactical nuclear attacks. In such a case, clearly, the worst

of equity market declines is not behind us. If there is no further escalation but more of the status quo, then we do not expect the war alone to lead to further downside in equities.

NATO allies are also trying to balance supporting Ukraine while not risking direct military engagement with Russia. The risks of an accident have increased, which could also lead to further downside.

The Federal Reserve: On March 16th, the Federal Reserve embarked upon its tightening cycle with a 25 basis point increase in the Federal Funds rate. While the market rallied by 5% from its intraday low on that day to its close on March 18th, some have argued that the equity market is mistaken — none more forcefully than Larry Summers, former Secretary of the Treasury. In a *Washington Post* opinion piece entitled, *The stock market like the Fed's plan to raise interest rates. It's wrong*, he points out that the Federal Open Market Committee's (FOMC's) economic projections represent “wishful and delusional thinking.”¹

The Federal Reserve is also walking a tight rope — fighting inflation that is driven by a mix of supply chain-driven constraints, tight labor markets, housing and most recently by increases in energy prices, while also trying to avoid causing a recession. Our colleagues in Global Investment Research estimate that every \$10/barrel increase in the price of crude oil (about 10% at current prices) increases inflation in the US by 0.2% (incidentally, about the same in the Eurozone) and reduces US GP growth by 0.1% (about 0.2% in the Eurozone).

Clients have asked whether the late 1970s provide the best analogue for the outlook through 2023: high inflation, tightening monetary policy, geopolitical factors that increased the price of oil, and localized wars. They further ask whether they should brace for the stagflationary environment of that era and adjust their portfolios accordingly. We do not believe so. While there are similarities, the differences are far greater.

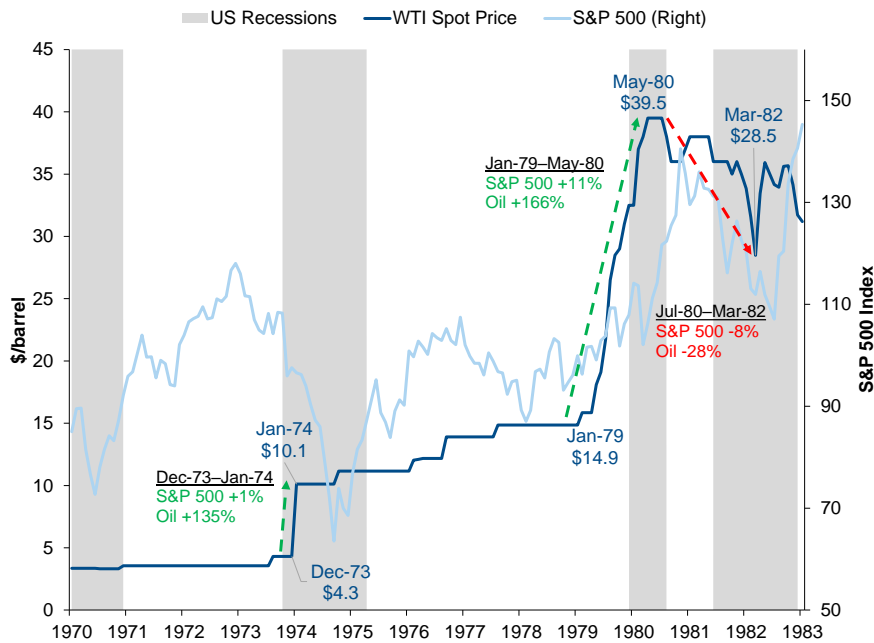
First, the oil price shocks from the Arab Oil Embargo, the Iranian Revolution and subsequent Iran-Iraq war dwarf the current increases in oil prices. As shown in Exhibit 2 below, oil prices nearly tripled from \$4/barrel to \$11/barrel after the Arab Oil Embargo which was in response to the Arab-Israeli war in October 1973. They nearly tripled a second time after the Iranian Revolution in late 1978/early 1979 when prices increased from \$15/barrel to \$40/barrel. Over the entire period, oil prices increased nearly 10-fold. It was a regime shift that will not be replicated.

In fact, we think there is zero probability of such an increase today. Therefore, we recommend clients avoid positioning their portfolios for such an outcome. While we have recommended a tactical allocation to energy stocks and Master Limited Partnerships as outlined in our 2022 *Outlook* — driven by favorable valuations and earnings and a modest increase in oil prices — we do not recommend a significant allocation to oil and other commodities.

We estimate that West Texas Intermediate oil will fluctuate between \$100–\$120 per barrel assuming:

- Absence of further government sanctions on Russian oil
- Continuation of some self-sanctioning by traders and other importers who have turned away Russian oil
- Expectation of 2–3 million b/d of increased production from several OPEC countries including Iran (following a deal between the US and Iran)

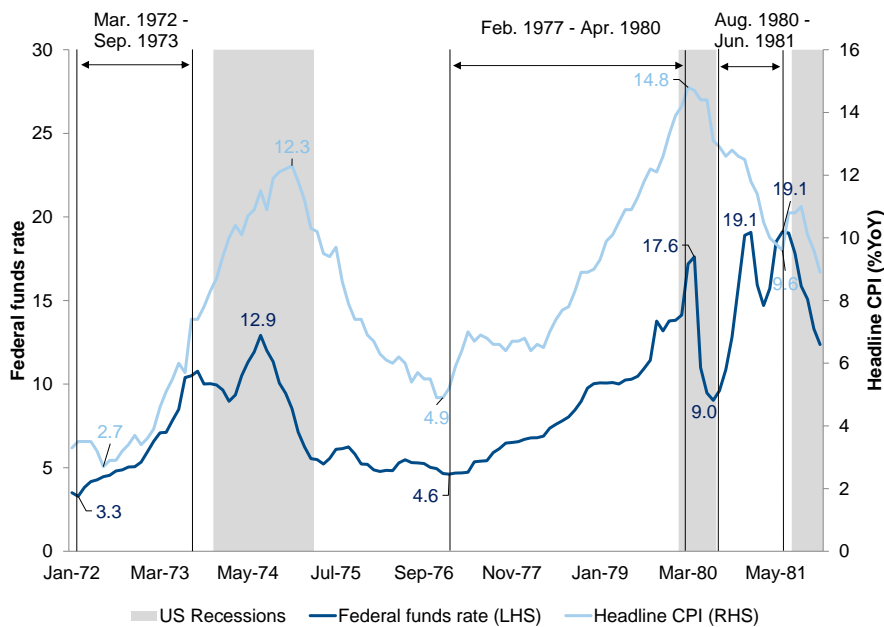
2. Major Moves in WTI (Oil in Nominal \$)



Source: Investment Strategy Group, Federal Reserve, Bloomberg, NBER.

Second, inflation was substantially higher and the magnitude of Federal Reserve tightening was enormous. As shown in the Exhibit 3, the Federal Reserve raised rates for 4.6% to 17.6% in its second round of tightening and eventually to 19.1%. Inflation rose from 4.9% to a peak of 14.8%. Even the most pessimistic of forecasts today estimate that inflation will be trending downward through the second half of 2022 and into 2023.

3. Federal Funds Rate and Headline CPI between 1972 and 1981



Source: Investment Strategy Group, Datastream.

Exhibit 4 shows a brief summary of our inflation forecasts. By late 2022, inflation will be declining from peak levels of early 2022, with year-on-year core inflation of 6.5% in March declining to 4.0% by December. The comparable numbers for the headline CPI are 8.4% and 5.3%, respectively.

4. Investment Strategy Group – US Inflation Forecast

		Headline CPI:	Core CPI:
12-month % changes:	March 2022 (peak):	8.4	6.5
	December 2022:	5.3	4.0
Annual avg % changes:	2022	6.9	5.3

Source: Investment Strategy Group.

Note: Forecasts are estimated, are based on assumptions, are subject to revision and may change as economic and market conditions change. There can be no assurance the forecasts will be achieved.

Third, financial markets and the role of central banks are very different compared to the 1970s. There are many more financial instruments and economic research tools that help the central bankers assess how the markets are pricing inflation risks, with Treasury Inflation Protected Securities and 5-year-5-year forward swaps as just two examples. Access to such constant market pricing and feedback mechanisms did not exist in the 1970s.

China: China is another source of uncertainty. It is walking a tight rope on multiple fronts:

- Balancing a zero-covid policy against a 5.5% GDP target.
- Offsetting the dampening effects of both declines in the property sector and increases in oil prices by easing monetary policy and increasing lending activity. China's current account balance may turn negative very quickly if energy prices stay in the \$100–\$120 range in 2022.
- Trying to maintain economic relations with the US, Europe and the UK — who collectively account for 35% of its exports — while not condemning Russia and allegedly agreeing to provide more Russian military support.²

Economic and Investment Implications

Risk of Recession: We have typically said that recessions are caused by one or a combination of three factors:

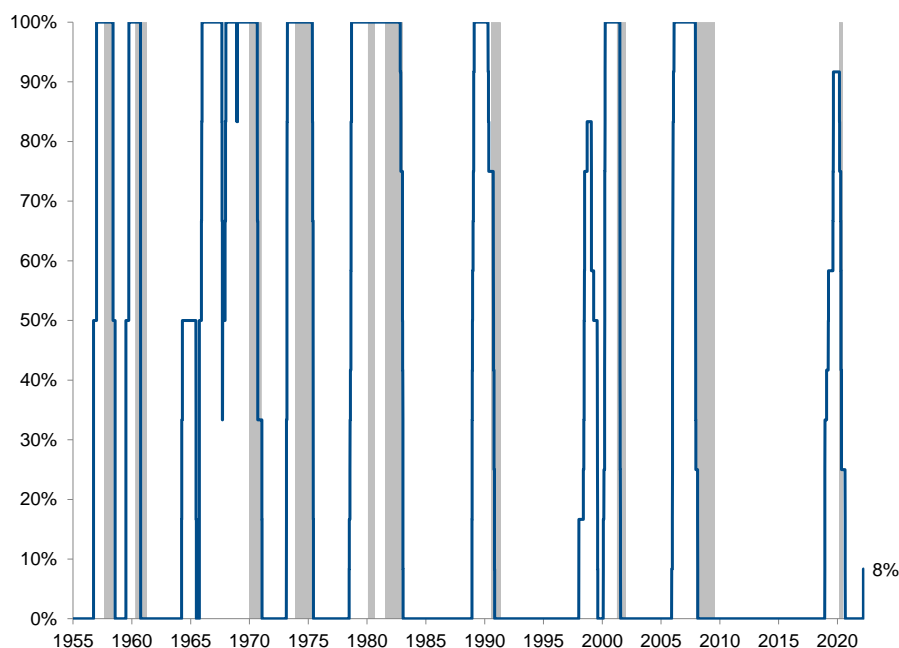
- Economic imbalances
- Federal Reserve tightening
- Exogenous shocks

While the US economy is well balanced, we have embarked upon Federal Reserve tightening and we are experiencing the shock of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These two factors have prompted us to increase the likelihood of a recession in the next 12 months (this includes the first quarter of 2023) from the 10% presented in our 2022 *Outlook* to 15%–20%. We note that the unconditional probability of recession in the past 40 years is 13%.

The risks are not higher in our view because of the well balanced economy, excess savings of about \$2.3 trillion, low unemployment rate of 3.8%, still easy financial conditions compared to year-end 2019, and a relatively modest pace of Federal Reserve tightening. The predicted pace of tightening of 1.75% by year end is not enough to throw the US economy into recession. On average, recessions occur 30 months after the first increase in the Federal Funds rate. And in the last 60 years, recessions have occurred when the Federal Reserve has increased rates by more than 3%.

Furthermore, our yield curve inversion diffusion index, which measures the bond market impact of Federal Reserve tightening, currently stands at 8%, as shown in Exhibit 5. While this index has increased from zero earlier this year, it has been more than 90% prior to every recession since 1955.

5. ISG Yield Curve Inversion Diffusion Index¹ - Through March 18, 2022



Source: Investment Strategy Group, Bloomberg, Haver Analytics.

(1) The diffusion index measures the percentage of yield curves inverted in the previous 6 months based on the total number of yield curves whose data was available at each point in time.

Economic Growth: We have lowered our US GDP forecast for 2022 to 3.6%, still well above an estimate of trend growth of about 2%. We also lowered our estimate of global growth to 3.6% from 4.5%.

Equity Market Return Expectations:

Earnings: We have lowered our earnings growth and S&P 500 price target as a result of slower US and non-US economic growth, as well as continued disruptions to the supply chain from China's zero-covid policy and the Ukraine-Russia war.

We expect S&P 500 earnings per share to grow by 8% compared to our 12% forecast at the beginning of year. During periods when economic growth is above trend, as we expect this year, earnings have grown by an average of 15%, with the median growth rate at 13%. Similarly, when headline inflation has stood between 4–6% and the economy has not been in recession, median earnings growth has been 13%.

The mid-point of our earnings estimate is \$225.50 per share, which implies less than a 2% increase from annualized fourth quarter earnings of 2021. On average, earnings have grown 7% from the fourth quarter in non-recessionary periods.

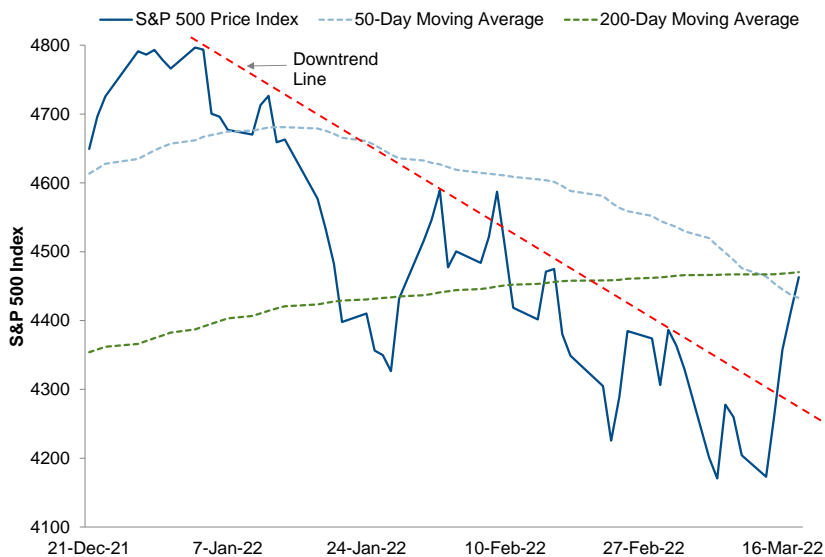
Given these strong historical growth precedents, we think our revised 8% earnings forecast is very achievable.

S&P 500 target: We have lowered our S&P 500 target range to 4700–4800 from our prior range of 4950–5050. Our total return for 2022 is now a modest 1%, compared to the 6% we forecast at the beginning of the year. From the closing price of the S&P 500 on March 18th, we expect the market to return about 7.5% in our base case, to which we assign a 60% probability. We assign equal 20% probabilities to our upside scenario of 5000 and our downside scenario of 3800.

Market technicals: In the Investment Strategy Group, we have always incorporated investor sentiment and positioning, as well as technical analysis, in our final investment recommendations. In fact, we have found such analysis to be particularly useful in periods of heightened market fear. Today, this analysis has three key implications.

First, as shown in Exhibit 6, recent S&P 500 price action has moved the index above its 50-day moving average, which is a favorable technical signal. The S&P 500 is also very close to its 200-day moving average, the recapturing of which would be an additional positive. More importantly, the Index has broken a trend of lower lows and lower highs in its daily pricing — another indication that the year-to-date downtrend could be reversing.

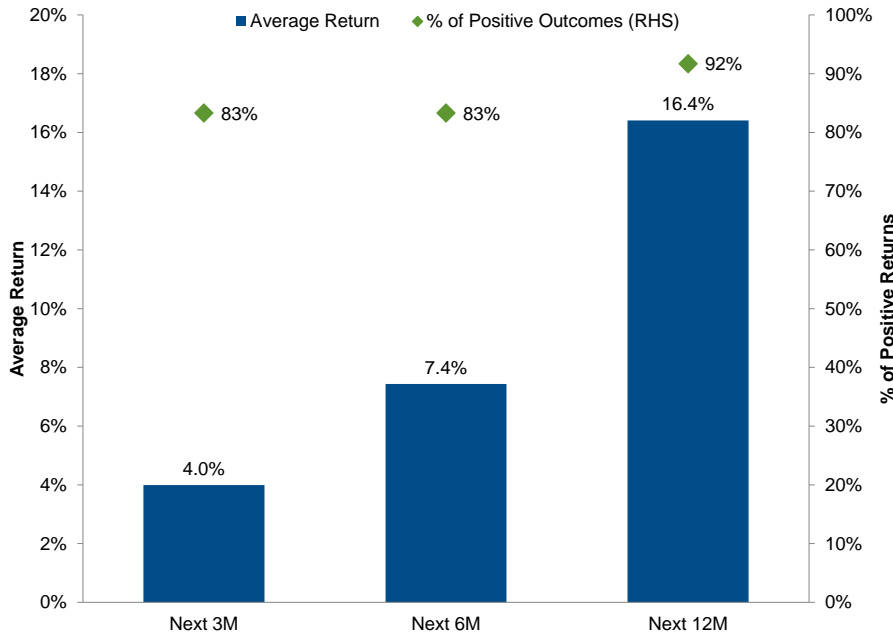
6. S&P 500 Price Index - Through March 18, 2022



Source: Investment Strategy Group, Bloomberg.

Second, as shown in Exhibit 7, when CBOE VIX has declined below 30 after a steady period of being above it, market returns have been well-above average in the next 3, 6, and 12 months — reaching 16.4% on average over the next 12 months.

7. Implied S&P 500 Upside from Past Episodes When VIX Crossed Below 30 After at Least 11 Days Above

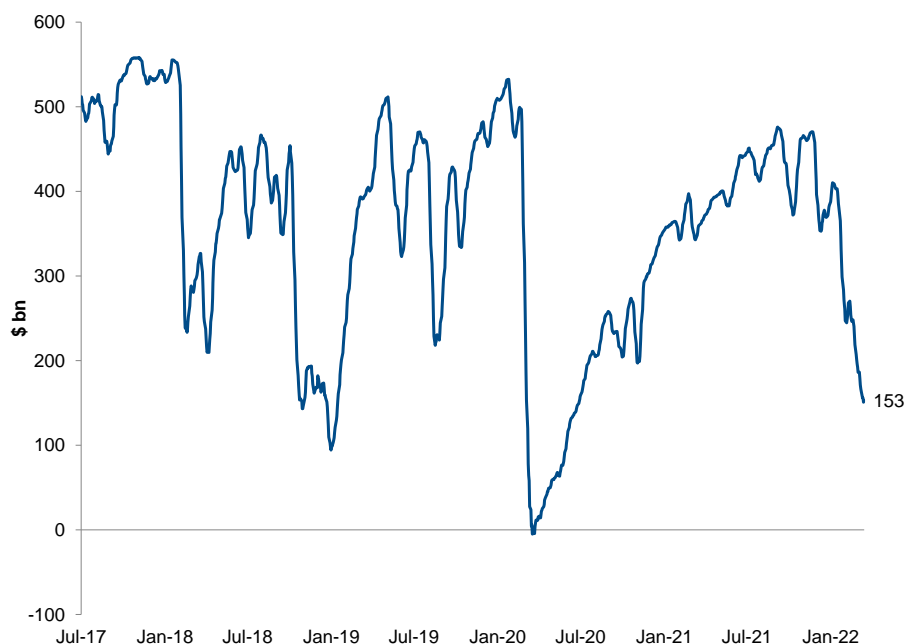


Source: Investment Strategy Group, LPL Research, Bloomberg.

Third, the significant selling of over \$300 billion of equities by rule-based investors (see Exhibit 8) such as CTAs — who are heavily influenced by market momentum — is likely to begin reversing itself given last week’s market rally. Our colleagues in the Global Markets Division estimate that such investors will have to buy \$64 billion of equities even in an unchanged market. Should the market rise further, their rules-based strategies would imply even greater additional equity purchases. And even if the market were to decline, their selling pressure will not be significant since their equity exposure already stands in the bottom decile of its historical distribution.

Finally, David Kostin, Chief US equity strategist at Goldman Sachs, estimates \$1 trillion of stock buybacks by US companies in 2022, providing a tailwind to US equities for the rest of the year. Indeed, US corporations have already authorized \$306 billion of buybacks thus far in 2022, the largest amount at this point in the year in the history of the data.

8. Estimated Global Equity Position of Systematic Macro¹ (in \$bn) – Through March 17, 2022



Source: Investment Strategy Group, Goldman Sachs Global Markets Division.

(1) Includes CTA/trend-following, risk parity/volatility-weighted and volatility-control funds.

Key Takeaways

- Greater risks from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, higher oil prices and a faster pace of Federal Reserve tightening have prompted us to lower our GDP growth forecast for the US and for the rest of the world.
- Lower growth implies lower earnings growth and lower equity market returns.
- Nevertheless, in spite of lower equity market returns, we still expect attractive returns from current levels and maintain our recommendation to stay invested.
- We encourage clients to make sure they have the right strategic asset allocation to be able to withstand the volatility in the current environment.
- The Russian invasion of Ukraine and China's high wire act further confirm our view of US Preeminence with a recommendation to have a higher allocation to US assets than suggested by market capitalization weighted indexes.

Endnotes:

(1) Lawrence H. Summers, "The stock market liked the Fed's plan to raise interest rates. It's wrong," *The Washington Post*, March 17, 2022.

(2) Edward Wong and Julian E. Barnes, "Russia Asked China for Military and Economic Aid for Ukraine War, U.S. Officials Say", *New York Times*, March 13, 2022.

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