

# Weekly commentary

December 13, 2021

**BlackRock**

## Highlights of our 2022 outlook

- We see 2022 heralding a new market regime by delivering global stock gains and bond losses for a second year in a row – a first in about half a century.
- Stocks rallied back to near record levels and yields rose last week as worries of Omicron dissipated. China’s central bank loosened policy to shore up growth.
- The focus this week is on central banks, with potential clues on tapering (Fed), rates (Bank of England) and more accommodation (European Central Bank).

We are entering a new market regime unlike any in the past half century: We expect another year of positive global stocks returns coupled with a down year for bonds. Central banks are set to start raising rates but remain more tolerant of inflation as the restart rolls on. We see inflation settling above pre-Covid trends; we’re going to be living with inflation. We favor equities over fixed income as a result, but have dialed back our risk-taking given the wide range of potential outcomes in 2022.

## Rare combination

Annual returns for global equities and fixed income, 1977–2021



Past performance is not a reliable indicator of current or future results. Indexes are unmanaged and not subject to fees. It is not possible to invest directly in an index. Sources: BlackRock Investment Institute, with data from Refinitiv Datastream and Bloomberg, December 2021. Notes: The chart shows annual returns for global equities and bonds in U.S. dollar terms from 1977–2021. Index proxies are the MSCI All-Country World index for equities (MSCI World before 1988) and Bloomberg Global Aggregate index for bonds (U.S. Aggregate before 1991).

We see 2022 heralding a new regime by delivering global stock gains and bond losses for a second year – what would be a first since data started in 1977. This unusual outcome is the next phase of our *new nominal* theme that is still playing out: Central banks and bond yields are slower to respond to higher inflation than in the past. That should keep real, or inflation-adjusted, bond yields historically low and underpin equities valuations. It’s rare for global stock returns to be positive and bonds negative in any one calendar year (the top left quadrant in the chart), let alone two years in a row. Why did this happen in 2021? The powerful restart of economic activity resulted in severe inflation pressures and supply bottlenecks. Most DM central banks did not respond, a stark departure from the usual pre-emptive tightening of the past. This was the *new nominal* in action and marked the start of the regime shift. Nominal government bond yields edged up and prices fell, but real yields stayed historically low amid rising inflation and supported stocks. Corporate earnings surged as the restart rolled on, driving outsized equities gains.



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The big change in 2022: Central banks will be withdrawing some monetary support as the restart does not need stimulus. We see more moderate equities returns as a result. We expect the Fed to kick off rate hikes but remain more tolerant of inflation than it has been in the past. The Fed has long achieved its inflation target, so the timing and pace of higher rates will depend on how it interprets its “broad and inclusive” employment mandate. The European Central Bank faces a weaker inflation outlook and is likely to stay even easier on policy. We had flagged inflation, and now we’re **Living with inflation** – our first 2022 investment theme. We see inflation settling at levels higher than pre-Covid even as supply bottlenecks ease.

Our second theme is **Cutting through confusion** that is gripping markets. Our base case aims to do exactly that. We expect new virus strains to delay, but not derail, the restart thanks to effective vaccine campaigns. We could see a short-term macro and sectoral impact, but the big picture is unchanged: Less growth now is more later. We are, however, dealing with a confluence of events that have no historical parallels: the unique restart, new virus strains and untested central bank frameworks. This means our new market regime view could be wrong about the policy response or the growth outlook – and increases the range of potential outcomes. We are trimming risk-taking as a result.

Playing into the inflation and confusion themes is the race for the world to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. Climate change is real, and we believe the net-zero transition will brighten the economic outlook. Yes, it’s a decades-long supply shock contributing to higher inflation, but less so than any of the alternatives: no climate action or a disorderly transition. **Navigating net zero** – our third theme – aims to capture the opportunities this transition will bring. This is not just a long-term story – it’s happening *now*. Supply shocks and the tectonic shift toward sustainable investing are already playing out.

How to thrive in the new market regime? We prefer equities in the inflationary backdrop of the strong restart. We favor developed market (DM) stocks over emerging markets (EM) as we dial down risk slightly amid rising risks to our base case. We are underweight DM government bonds – we see yields gradually heading higher but staying historically low. We prefer inflation-linked bonds, partly as portfolio diversifiers. Our strategic asset views – a broad preference for equities over nominal government bonds and credit – have been stable through the noisy economic restart. We also like private markets for their diversification and return potential. For more details, visit our refreshed directional and granular asset class views.

## Market backdrop

Risk assets rallied back to near record levels last week as worries of the Omicron virus strain dissipated. The People’s Bank of China cut bank reserve requirements to help the flow of credit. We see this as a sign that policymakers are prepared to shore up growth – albeit sparingly as the long-term focus is on increasing the *quality* of growth. We expect the Fed’s interpretation of its employment objective to set the timing of the kick-off on rate hikes and their pace. We see inflation settling at a level higher than pre-COVID even as pressures from supply bottlenecks ease, as we expect a muted policy response to inflation.

## Assets in review

Selected asset performance, 2021 year-to-date and range



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Sources: BlackRock Investment Institute, with data from Refinitiv Datastream as of Dec. 10, 2021. Notes: The two ends of the bars show the lowest and highest returns at any point this year to date, and the dots represent current year-to-date returns. Emerging market (EM), high yield and global corporate investment grade (IG) returns are denominated in U.S. dollars, and the rest in local currencies. Indexes or prices used are, in descending order: spot Brent crude, MSCI USA Index, MSCI Europe Index, ICE U.S. Dollar Index (DXY), MSCI Emerging Markets Index, Bank of America Merrill Lynch Global High Yield Index, J.P. Morgan EMBI Index, spot gold, Refinitiv Datastream Italy 10-year benchmark government bond index, Bank of America Merrill Lynch Global Broad Corporate Index, Refinitiv Datastream Germany 10-year benchmark government bond index and Refinitiv Datastream U.S. 10-year benchmark government bond index.

## Macro insights

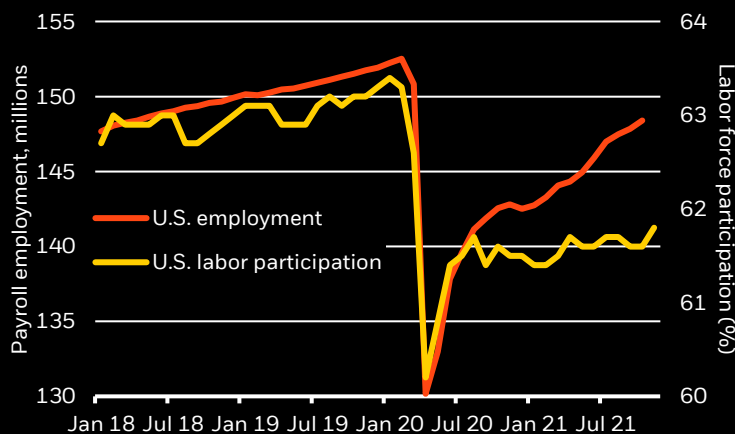
When will the Federal Reserve kick off its interest rate hikes? With its inflation objective met, it all depends on the labor market. The Fed’s goal is “broad and inclusive” full employment – but it hasn’t defined what that means.

The unemployment rate is steadily falling back to its pre-Covid level of 3.5%, but the Fed will also be paying close attention to the labor participation rate (the share of the working-age population either with or actively looking for work). This fell sharply at the start of the pandemic – see the chart – as many people retired early or stopped looking for a job. This has helped lower the unemployment rate as those people are no longer counted. The labor participation rate is still well below pre-Covid levels, however, so the Fed may want to wait for an upward turn. It also may want to see less divergence in participation rates across ethnic groups.

What is clear: The Fed will need to explain what it thinks “full employment” means – and soon. See our [macro insights](#) hub.

## What does full employment mean?

U.S. employment and labor participation, 2018–2021



Sources: BlackRock Investment Institute and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, with data from Refinitiv Datastream, December 2021. Notes: The chart shows total U.S. nonfarm payrolls (orange line) and the U.S. labor force participation rate (yellow line). The labor force participation rate is the percentage of the working age population that is working or actively looking for work.

## Investment themes

### 1 Living with inflation

- We expect inflation to be persistent and settle above pre Covid levels. We expect central banks to kick off rate hikes but remain more tolerant of price pressures, keeping real interest rates historically low and supportive of risk assets.
- Inflation is being driven by the unusual restart dynamics of extraordinary demand bumping up against supply bottlenecks. We expect many supply-demand imbalances to resolve next year.
- The policy response to rising inflation isn’t uniform. The Fed and the European Central Bank (ECB) are more tolerant of inflation, even as the Fed has started to warn of inflation risks.
- Other developed market (DM) central banks have signaled policy rate paths with steeper initial increases, and many of their emerging market (EM) counterparts have already lifted off.
- The Fed has started tapering bond purchases by \$15 billion a month and indicated it may speed up this timeline. The central bank has achieved its new inflation goal to make up for past misses; the key now is how it interprets its more ambitious full employment mandate.
- We expect the Fed to start raising rates in 2022 –albeit not as soon as market pricing. But what matter are the rate trajectory and destination, not the timing of the first hike. We expect a historically muted policy response to inflation.
- **Investment implication:** We prefer equities over fixed income and remain overweight inflation-linked bonds.

### 2 Cutting through confusion

- A unique mix of events - the restart of economic activity, virus strains, supply driven inflation and new central bank frameworks - could cause markets and policymakers to misread the current surge in inflation.
- We keep the big picture in mind: We see the restart rolling on, inflation meeting a muted central bank response, and real rates remaining historically low.
- We do see increasing risks around this base case: Central banks could revert to their old policy response, and growth could surprise on the upside or disappoint.
- There’s also a risk markets misread China’s policy. The country has emphasized social objectives and quality growth over quantity in regulatory crackdowns that have spooked some investors. Yet policymakers can no longer ignore the growth slowdown, and we expect incremental loosening across three pillars - monetary, fiscal and regulatory.
- **Investment implication:** We have trimmed risk-taking amid an unusually wide range of outcomes.

### 3 Navigating net zero

- Climate risk is investment risk, and the narrowing window for governments to reach net-zero goals means that investors need to start adapting their portfolios today. The net-zero journey is not just a 2050 story, it’s a now story.
- Sustainability cuts across multiple dimensions: the outlook for inflation, geopolitics and policy. The green transition comes with costs and higher inflation, yet the economic outlook is unambiguously brighter than a scenario of no climate action or a disorderly transition. Both would generate lower growth and higher inflation, in our view.
- Risks around a disorderly transition are high – particularly if execution fails to match governments’ ambitions to cut emissions.
- We favor sectors with clear transition plans. Over a strategic horizon, we like the sectors that stand to benefit more from the transition, such as tech and healthcare, because of their relatively low carbon emissions.
- **Investment implication:** We favor DM equities over EM as we see them as better positioned in the green transition.

# Week ahead

<b>Dec. 12</b>	Japan Tankan manufacturing outlook	<b>Dec. 16</b>	European Central Bank and Bank of England decisions, Flash PMIs
<b>Dec. 14-15</b>	U.S. Federal Reserve policy meeting	<b>Dec. 17</b>	Bank of Japan policy decision

The focus this week is on policy announcements by the U.S. Federal Reserve, Bank of England (BoE) and European Central Bank (ECB) to indicate whether they are ready to end asset purchases earlier (Fed) start raising rates (BoE) or set out plans for more accommodation next year (ECB). The spread of Omicron may cause some policymakers to hold back from tightening, and December flash PMI data will give an early read on the variant's impact on business sentiment.

## Directional views

Strategic (long-term) and tactical (6-12 month) views on broad asset classes, December 2021

Asset	Change in view	
	Previous	New
	<b>Underweight</b>	<b>Neutral</b>
		<b>Overweight</b>
Asset	Strategic view	Tactical view
<b>Equities</b>	<p style="text-align: center;">+1</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">+1</p> <p>We keep our overweight on equities on a strategic horizon. We see the combination of low real rates, strong growth and reasonable valuations as favourable for the asset class. Incorporating climate change in our expected returns brightens the appeal of developed market equities given the large weights of sectors such as tech and healthcare in benchmark indices. Tactically, we are overweight equities amid solid economic fundamentals and historically low real rates.</p>
<b>Credit</b>	<p style="text-align: center;">-1</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Neutral</p> <p>We stay underweight credit on a strategic basis as valuations are rich, and we prefer to take risk in equities instead. On a tactical horizon, we are neutral credit given low spreads across sectors and prefer EM local markets to high yield.</p>
<b>Govt bonds</b>	<p style="text-align: center;">-1</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">-1</p> <p>We are strategically underweight nominal government bonds given their diminished ability to act as portfolio ballasts with yields near lower bounds. Within the underweight on nominal DM government bonds, we prefer shorter-dated over long-dated maturities. Rising debt levels may eventually pose risks to the low rate regime. We prefer inflation-linked bonds. Tactically, we keep our significant U.S. Treasuries underweight on expectations of rising yields into the Fed's taper and rate kick-off. We prefer inflation-linked bonds for interest rate exposure and as a portfolio diversifier.</p>
<b>Private markets</b>	<p style="text-align: center;">Neutral</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Neutral</p> <p>We believe non-traditional return streams, including private credit, have the potential to add value and diversification. Our neutral view is based on a starting allocation that is much larger than what most qualified investors hold. Many institutional investors remain underinvested in private markets as they overestimate liquidity risks, in our view. Private markets are a complex asset class and not suitable for all investors.</p>

Note: Views are from a U.S. dollar perspective, December 2021. This material represents an assessment of the market environment at a specific time and is not intended to be a forecast of future events or a guarantee of future results. This information should not be relied upon by the reader as research or investment advice regarding any particular funds, strategy or security.

# Granular views

Six to 12-month tactical views on selected assets vs. broad global asset classes by level of conviction, December 2021

		Underweight	Neutral	Overweight	Change in view	
					Previous	New
Asset		Underweight	Overweight			
Equities	<b>Developed markets</b>					
	United States					
	Europe					
	UK					
	Japan					
	<b>China</b>					
	<b>Emerging markets</b>					
	Asia ex-Japan					
	U.S. Treasuries					
Fixed Income	Treasury Inflation-Protected Securities					
	European government bonds					
	UK gilts					
	China government bonds					
	Global investment grade					
	Global high yield					
	Emerging market – hard currency					
	Emerging market – local currency					
	Asia fixed income					

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