

Inflation Surprise? No, Not Really

Author



Robert M. Almeida, Jr.
Portfolio Manager and
Global Investment Strategist

In brief

- Inflation upside has not been a surprise to consumers (or us).
- The market is currently correcting mistaken assumptions.
- Our assumptions moving forward.

Inflation

Over the past couple of weeks, several inflation readings have taken the market by surprise. It wasn't a surprise, however, for those who buy food, pay utility bills or pay rent. Commodity prices have surged and outpaced stock prices year to date, but the acute pain for households has been the cost of things they need, such as eggs, milk, electricity or shelter, which are not deflating.

The market's changed assumptions

Financial assets, including US Treasury bills and sovereign bonds, represent weighted probabilities about future (cash flow) outcomes. When new information changes on those probabilities, asset prices adjust. When financial price volatility is high, it's the market correcting for mistaken assumptions but also expressing increased uncertainty.

In the final months of 2023, investors took their cues from central bankers. They began to discount that inflation would recede to desired levels, allowing for a loosening of monetary policy and softer sovereign yield curves. Obviously, those assumptions were too strong.

As readers of Strategist Corner and/or clients of MFS know, this wasn't our base case. Our analysts were hearing from company management teams that labor remained in short supply. We expected this would keep aggregate demand elevated and restrict the type of policy loosening the market wanted. So, what now?

Looking ahead

In the Strategist Corner released on April 16, 2024, we described what we think is a paradigm shift. Our world is shifting from one of artificially suppressed interest rates and cheap manufacturing to something else. A world with greater needs for capital, specifically on equipment and labor, will prevent a return to abnormally low inflation and suppressed rates.



A pandemic, multiple wars and rising geopolitical tensions exposed the risks of stretched supply chains and outsourcing. Globalization is not going away, but it's being rerouted due to the risks of not having goods when needed, and that has financial implications.

2024 may mark the first year since the Black Plague that the global population is expected to decline. While that represents a chronic problem and a topic for another day, we currently have an aging workforce at the same time demand for workers is rising due to reshoring. The give in that equation is price, in the form of higher sustained labor costs.

While this may lead to higher wages, consumer spending, overall economic growth and inflation versus the 2010s, it will come at the expense of profits and valuation that investors are willing to pay for those profits. This is the opposite of the 2010s paradigm.

Conclusion

To be clear, I am not suggesting monetary policy will be tightened or yield curves will steepen. I think the market underappreciated the implications of this paradigm change. And while rates will ultimately fall, it probably won't be a straight-line decline like the market anticipated. Our world isn't that simple.

More importantly, as the world adapts, businesses, whose profit streams were primarily sourced via cheap debt and labor, will succumb to balance sheet stress. Unlike during the low-cost regime, companies unfit for purpose will likely deliver disappointing financial results. We believe that avoiding those financial assets may prove beneficial to discretionary managers and advisors. ▲



The views expressed are those of the author(s) and are subject to change at any time. These views are for informational purposes only and should not be relied upon as a recommendation to purchase any security or as a solicitation or investment advice. No forecasts can be guaranteed.

Unless otherwise indicated, logos and product and service names are trademarks of MFS® and its affiliates and may be registered in certain countries.

Distributed by: **U.S.** - MFS Investment Management; **Latin America** - MFS International Ltd.

Please note that in Europe and Asia Pacific, this document is intended for distribution to investment professionals and institutional use only. In Canada, this document is intended for distribution to institutional clients only.

Note to readers in Canada: Issued in Canada by MFS Investment Management Canada Limited. **Note to UK and Switzerland readers:** Issued in the UK and Switzerland by MFS International (U.K.) Limited ("MIL UK"), a private limited company registered in England and Wales with the company number 03062718, and authorised and regulated in the conduct of investment business by the UK Financial Conduct Authority. MIL UK, an indirect subsidiary of MFS®, has its registered office at One Carter Lane, London, EC4V 5ER. **Note to Europe (ex UK and Switzerland) readers:** Issued in Europe by MFS Investment Management (Lux) S.à r.l. (MFS Lux) – authorized under Luxembourg law as a management company for Funds domiciled in Luxembourg and which both provide products and investment services to institutional investors and is registered office is at S.a r.l. 4 Rue Albert Borschette, Luxembourg L-1246. Tel: 352 2826 12800. This material shall not be circulated or distributed to any person other than to professional investors (as permitted by local regulations) and should not be relied upon or distributed to persons where such reliance or distribution would be contrary to local regulation; **Singapore** - MFS International Singapore Pte. Ltd. (CRN 201228809M); **Australia/New Zealand** - MFS International Australia Pty Ltd ("MFS Australia") (ABN 68 607 579 537) holds an Australian financial services licence number 485343. MFS Australia is regulated by the Australian Securities and Investments Commission.; **Hong Kong** - MFS International (Hong Kong) Limited ("MIL HK"), a private limited company licensed and regulated by the Hong Kong Securities and Futures Commission (the "SFC"). MIL HK is approved to engage in dealing in securities and asset management regulated activities and may provide certain investment services to "professional investors" as defined in the Securities and Futures Ordinance ("SFO"); **For Professional Investors in China** – MFS Financial Management Consulting (Shanghai) Co., Ltd. 2801-12, 28th Floor, 100 Century Avenue, Shanghai World Financial Center, Shanghai Pilot Free Trade Zone, 200120, China, a Chinese limited liability company registered to provide financial management consulting services.; **Japan** - MFS Investment Management K.K., is registered as a Financial Instruments Business Operator, Kanto Local Finance Bureau (FIBO) No.312, a member of the Investment Trust Association, Japan and the Japan Investment Advisers Association. As fees to be borne by investors vary depending upon circumstances such as products, services, investment period and market conditions, the total amount nor the calculation methods cannot be disclosed in advance. All investments involve risks, including market fluctuation and investors may lose the principal amount invested. Investors should obtain and read the prospectus and/or document set forth in Article 37-3 of Financial Instruments and Exchange Act carefully before making the investments; **Bahrain** - This document has not been approved by the Central Bank of Bahrain which takes no responsibility for its contents. No offer to the public will be made in the Kingdom of Bahrain and this document is intended to be read by the addressee only and must not be passed to, issued to, or shown to the public generally. The Central Bank of Bahrain assumes no responsibility for the accuracy and completeness of the statements and information contained in this document and expressly disclaims any liability whatsoever for any loss howsoever arising from reliance upon the whole or any part of the contents of this document. The Board of Directors and the management of the issuer accepts responsibility for the information contained in this document. To the best of the knowledge and belief of the board of directors and the management, who have all taken all reasonable care to ensure that such is the case, the information contained in this document is in accordance with the facts and does not omit anything likely to affect the reliability of such information.; **Kuwait** - This document is not for general circulation to the public in Kuwait. The information has not been licensed for offering in Kuwait by the Kuwait Capital Markets Authority or any other relevant Kuwaiti government agency. No private or public offering of the information is being made in Kuwait, and no agreement relating to the information will be concluded in Kuwait. No marketing or solicitation or inducement activities are being used to offer or market the information in Kuwait.; **Oman** - For Residents of the Sultanate of Oman: The information contained in this document does not constitute a public offer of securities in the Sultanate of Oman as contemplated by the Commercial Companies Law of Oman (Royal Decree 4/74) or the Capital Market Law of Oman (Royal Decree 80/98). This information is being circulated on a limited basis only to corporate entities that fall within the description of sophisticated investors (Article 139 of the Executive Regulations of the Capital Market Law). The recipient acknowledges that they are a sophisticated investor who has experience in business and financial matters and is capable of evaluating the merits and risks on an investment.; **South Africa** - This document has not been approved by the Financial Services Board and neither MFS International (U.K.) Limited nor its funds are registered for public sale in South Africa.; **UAE** - This document, and the information contained herein, does not constitute, and is not intended to constitute, a public offer of securities in the United Arab Emirates and accordingly should not be construed as such. The information is only being offered to a limited number of exempt investors in the UAE who fall under one of the following categories of non-natural Qualified Investors: (1) an investor which is able to manage its investments on its own, namely: (a) the federal government, local governments, government entities and authorities or companies wholly-owned by any such entities; (b) international entities and organisations; or (c) a person licensed to carry out a commercial activity in the UAE, provided that investment is one of the objects of such person; or (2) an investor who is represented by an investment manager licensed by the SCA, (each a "non-natural Qualified Investor"). The information and data have not been approved by or licensed or registered with the UAE Central Bank, the Securities and Commodities Authority, the Dubai Financial Services Authority, the Financial Services Regulatory Authority or any other relevant licensing authorities or governmental agencies in the UAE (the "Authorities"). The Authorities assume no liability for any investment that the named addressee makes as a non-natural Qualified Investor diligence on the accuracy of the information relating to the securities. If you do not understand the contents of this document you should consult an authorised financial adviser.; **Saudi Arabia** - This document may not be distributed in the Kingdom except to such persons as are permitted under the Investment Funds Regulations issued by the Capital Market Authority. The Capital Market Authority does not make any representation as to the accuracy or completeness of this document, and expressly disclaims any liability whatsoever for any loss arising from, or incurred in reliance upon, any part of this document. Prospective purchasers of the securities offered hereby should conduct their own due diligence on the accuracy of the information relating to the securities. If you do not understand the contents of this document, you should consult an authorised financial adviser.; **Qatar** - This material/fund is only being offered to a limited number of investors who are willing and able to conduct an independent investigation of the risks involved in an investment in such material/fund. The material does not constitute an offer to the public and is for the use only of the named addressee and should not be given or shown to any other person (other than employees, agents or consultants in connection with the addressee's consideration thereof). The fund has not been and will not be registered with the Qatar Central Bank or under any laws of the State of Qatar. No transaction will be concluded in your jurisdiction and any inquiries regarding the material/fund should be made to your contact outside Qatar.