

Rathbone Multi-Asset Total Return Portfolio

Monthly update February 2022

In the space of a few weeks, everything we have all been pondering has been scattered like leaves in the wind. Our world appears to have changed, although exactly how is obscured by the clouds of war.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine was predicted by US intelligence services, but those warnings seemed like part of an information war right up until the moment tanks rolled across the border. Russia's advance has been much slower than many expected, facing stiff Ukrainian resistance, and evidence of rockets and artillery targeting urban areas is multiplying. The growing death toll and the huge flow of refugees is devastating to watch.

Western sanctions have also been much stiffer than Russia – and the rest of the world – ever expected. Embargoes on trade in all sorts of important industries, from pharmaceuticals through to technology, armament suppliers and airlines, have been combined with freezing the assets of the Russian President and many of his leadership. Western nations have cut off several Russian lenders from European and US markets, frozen their offshore assets and barred some from the SWIFT cross-border payments system. The West has also taken a bold new step, something that has happened only once before (during the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979): freezing the assets of a central bank, this time preventing Russia's from selling any of its Western foreign exchange reserves.

For years, Russia's central bank has amassed a huge pile of bonds, gold and cash – about \$630 billion (£470bn) as of last month – which it could use to prop up its currency and to pay for any imbalance in the nation's payments because of sanctions. This was thought to make Russia 'sanction-proof'. However, at a stroke, Western governments cut off Russia from assets held in their nations by barring brokers, custodians and central banks from dealing with it. These assets make up the lion's share of Russian reserves. By convention, central banks typically have sovereign immunity to such sanctions, but the West has ignored this.

Like a lightning bolt, the news hit the rouble. At one point, it had dropped 40%, driving the Russian central bank to more than double its interest rate to 20%. Many Russians rushed to withdraw their money in euros and dollars to protect their savings; bank runs and a potential financial collapse look very possible.

Russia's resources

The paths of inflation and monetary policy have been the focus for investors for many months now. That remains the case but so many of the assumptions underpinning analysis of them have been undermined by the war in Ukraine.

The clout of Russia's economy is sometimes denigrated by comparing it with the economy of Texas, which is a tenth larger. However, that belies the pivotal role Russia has in the global market for raw materials and energy. It is the world's largest exporter of oil (Saudi Arabia pips it for crude oil, but for all types of the black stuff Russia is supreme). It is by far the largest supplier of gas to Europe, accounting for roughly 40%. Russia is a major exporter of wood, coal, enriched uranium, nickel, aluminium, copper, platinum, palladium and steel. Russia also sells the most wheat worldwide; Ukraine is also in the top five exporters of this crucial food staple, and it's a huge supplier of corn as well. And the list goes on...

These commodities are the bedrock for virtually everything that our higher-valued economies produce and consume. With this context, you can begin to understand why the West has carved out all these industries from its extensive sanctions. Any disruption to these markets will have tremendous implications for the cost of virtually everything. Very simply, it would amplify global inflation that is already running red hot. Just the potential for disruption has sent the prices of all these commodities markedly higher. Inflation is now likely to be higher for longer than investors were expecting just a month ago.

What does this mean for central banks? Inflation grinding yet higher puts pressure on them to increase interest rates to prevent prices getting out of control. Yet they are unable to control the supply of these crucial substances. All they can do is reduce the demand for them by increasing borrowing costs, which leads to lower economic growth and potentially recession. It's still unclear exactly how they will react. The risk of them making a mistake – either by tightening too much or by not tightening enough – has risen significantly.

At the beginning of the month, because of the rising geopolitical risks, we added to our collection of sovereign bonds. These included the **US Treasury 1.5% 2030**, **Canadian Government 0.5% 2030**, **Japanese Government 0.1% 2023** and **Australian Government 1% 2031**. We also bought two vintages of gilts: the **UK Treasury 4 ¼% 2032** and **3/8% 2030** bonds. Meanwhile, we took profits from our **US Treasury Inflation-Protected Securities 0.125% 2024** bonds. Their coupons and principal payments are linked to American inflation and a rapid uplift in inflation expectations has pushed their value much higher in recent months.

During the month we have also added to our quality 'growth' companies – those companies with reliable earnings that are growing faster than the global economy – because their prices have dropped back this year, making them more attractive. Some of this cash came from selling bleach and home goods producer **Clorox**. The business's profit margin has fallen back in recent results, lending weight to concerns that it will have to absorb rising input costs rather than passing them on to customers or offsetting them with lower expenses.

We wanted to slightly reduce our portfolio's equity exposure, so we sold our holding in Swiss pharmaceutical company **Novartis**. We also completely sold oil major **BP** the day Russia invaded because of its 20% stake in Russian oil-exploration-to-pump business Rosneft.

Staying defensive

Put bluntly, at the moment, our outlook is to not have an outlook. There's just too much going on, too many variables, too much conflicting information, too much risk to take a bet on how markets will go from here. For many months now, we've been adjusting our portfolio to be as balanced as possible. We've beefed up our defensive assets – government bonds from several safe haven nations, commodities and structured products that protect us from stock market falls and greater volatility in interest rates. This has helped dampen drawdowns from the market turbulence of February and early March.

We had added to our **iShares Physical Gold ETF** in mid-February because of the increasing geopolitical tension, taking our holding to 4% of our portfolio. We are mindful, however, that gold is virtually the only reserve asset now available to Russia, as the 2,300-tonne hoard (worth roughly \$160 billion) is stored in Russian vaults. It's unclear whether Russia will add to its gold using cash from oil and gas consignments or sell it off to make payments. Either could affect the gold price. We are comfortable with the rest of our portfolio, however, and have maintained our defensive positioning as we wait for more clarity.

There are some very long-term effects of the war in Ukraine that do seem overwhelmingly likely, however. After the jolt of an invasion of a democracy on its outskirts, EU nations will probably bolster defence spending, which will mean higher taxes, all else being equal. That will have an impact on household finances and therefore growth in the world's third largest market. Also, most countries will be reviewing their energy strategies and supply of important natural resources. Self-sufficiency – or, at least, tie-ups with solid allies – will be front of mind. There will no doubt be changes to the energy mix in many cases – coal is likely to be seen as a necessary evil, especially in places like Germany. The transition to cleaner energy has been further complicated by this conflict.



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